

THE SOUL OF LILITH

Maria Corelli.

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THE SOUL OF LILITH

BY

MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF

'ARDATH,' 'A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS,' 'THELMA,'
'VENDETTA!' ETC.

'Not a drop of her blood was human,
But she was made like a soft sweet woman'

DANTE G. ROSSETTI



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

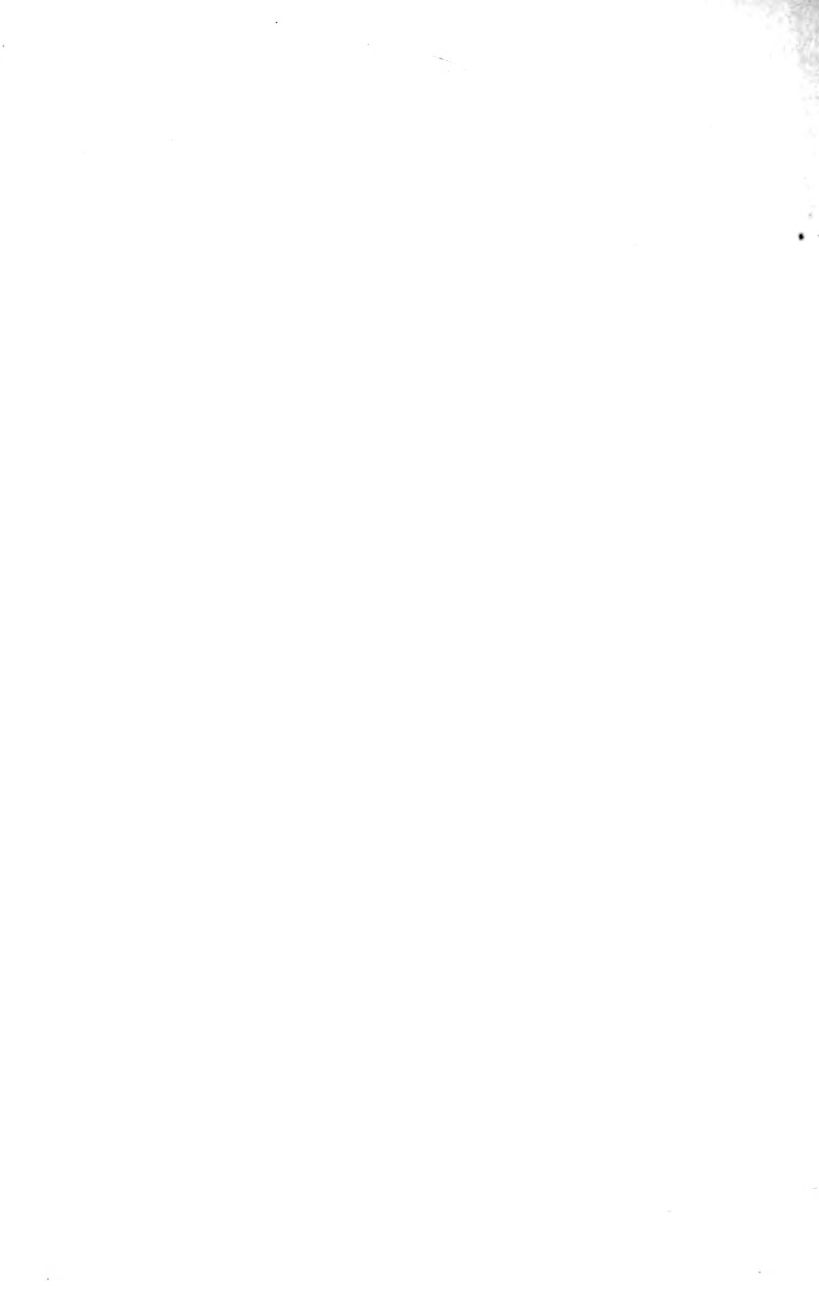
LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen

1892

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THE SOUL OF LILITH



CHAPTER I.

INTO the beautiful room, glowing with its regal hues of gold and purple, where the spell-bound Lilith lay, El-Râmi led his thoughtful and seemingly reluctant guest. Zaroba met them on the threshold and was about to speak,—but at an imperative sign from her master she refrained, and contented herself merely with a searching and inquisitive glance at the stately monk, the like of whom she had never seen before. She had good cause to be surprised,—for in all the time she had known him, El-Râmi had never permitted any visitor to enter the shrine of

Lilith's rest. Now he had made a new departure,—and in the eagerness of her desire to know why this stranger was thus freely admitted into the usually forbidden precincts, she went her way downstairs to seek Féraz, and learn from him the explanation of what seemed so mysterious. But it was now past ten o'clock at night, and Féraz was asleep,—fast locked in such a slumber that though Zaroba shook him and called him several times, she could not rouse him from his deep and almost death-like torpor. Baffled in her attempt, she gave it up at last, and descended to the kitchen to prepare her own frugal supper,—resolving, however, that as soon as she heard Féraz stirring she would put him through such a catechism, that she would find out, in spite of El-Râmi's haughty reticence, the name of the unknown visitor and the nature of his errand.

Meanwhile, El-Râmi himself and his grave companion stood by the couch of Lilith, and looked upon her in all her peaceful beauty for some minutes in silence. Presently El-Râmi grew impatient at the absolute impassiveness of the monk's attitude and the strange look

in his eyes—a look which expressed nothing but solemn compassion and reverence.

“Well!” he exclaimed almost brusquely—
“Now you see Lilith, as she is.”

“Not so!” said the monk quietly—“I do not see her as she is. But I *have* seen her, —whereas, . . . you have not!”

El-Râmi turned upon him somewhat angrily.

“Why will you always speak in riddles?” he said—“In plain language, what do you mean?”

“In plain language I mean what I say”—returned the monk composedly—“And I tell you I have seen Lilith. The Soul of Lilith *is* Lilith;—not this brittle casket made of earthy materials which we now look upon, and which is preserved from decomposition by an electric fluid. But—beautiful as it is—it is a corpse—and nothing more.”

El-Râmi regarded him with an expression of haughty amazement.

“Can a corpse breathe?” he inquired—
“Can a corpse have colour and movement? This Body was the body of a child when first I began my experiment,—now it is a woman’s

form full-grown and perfect—and you tell me it is a corpse!"

"I tell you no more than you told Féráz," said the monk coldly—"When the boy trespassed your command and yielded to the suggestion of your servant Zaroba, did you not assure him that Lilith was *dead*?"

El-Râmi started;—these words certainly gave him a violent shock of amazement.

"God!" he exclaimed—"How can you know all this?—Where did you hear it? Does the very air convey messages to you from a distance?—Does the light copy scenes for you, or what is it that gives you such a superhuman faculty for knowing everything you choose to know?"

The monk smiled gravely.

"I have only one method of work, El-Râmi"—he said—"And that method you are perfectly aware of, though you would not adopt it when I would have led you into its mystery. 'No man cometh to the Father, but by Me.' You know that old well-worn text—read so often, heard so often, that its true meaning is utterly lost sight of and forgotten. 'Coming to the Father' means the

attainment of a superhuman intuition—a superhuman knowledge,—but as you do not believe in these things, let them pass. But you were perfectly right when you told Féraz that this Lilith is dead ;—of course she is dead,—dead as a plant that is dried but has its colour preserved, and is made to move its leaves by artificial means. This body's breath is artificial,—the liquid in its veins is not blood, but a careful compound of the electric fluid that generates all life,—and it might be possible to preserve it thus forever. Whether its growth would continue is a scientific question ; it might and it might not, —probably it would cease if the Soul held no more communication with it. For its growth, which you consider so remarkable, is simply the result of a movement of the brain ;—when you force back the Spirit to converse through its medium, the brain receives an impetus, which it communicates to the spine and nerves,—the growth and extension of the muscles is bound to follow. Nevertheless, it is really a chemically animated corpse ; it is not Lilith. Lilith herself I know.”

“Lilith herself you know!” echoed El-

Râmi, stupefied—"You know . . . ! What is it that you would imply?"

"I know Lilith"—said the monk steadily, "as you have never known her. I have seen her as you have never seen her. She is a lonely creature,—a wandering angel, for ever waiting,—for ever hoping. Unloved, save by the Highest Love, she wends her flight from star to star, from world to world,—a spirit beautiful, but incomplete as a flower without its stem,—a bird without its mate. But her destiny is changing,—she will not be alone for long,—the hours ripen to their best fulfilment,—and Love, the crown and completion of her being, will unbind her chains and send her soaring to the Highest Joy in the glorious liberty of the free!"

While he spoke thus, softly, yet with eloquence and passion, a dark flush crept over El-Râmi's face,—his eyes glittered and his hand trembled—he seemed to be making some fierce inward resolve. He controlled himself, however, and asked with a studied indifference—

"Is this your prophecy?"

"It is not a prophecy; it is a truth;"

replied the monk gently—"If you doubt me, why not ask Her? She is here."

"Here?" El-Râmi looked about vaguely, first at the speaker, then at the couch where the so-called "corpse" lay breathing tranquilly—"Here, did you say? Naturally,—of course she is here."

And his glance reverted again to Lilith's slumbering form.

"No—not *here*—" said the monk with a gesture towards the couch—"but—*there*!"

And he pointed to the centre of the room where the lamp shed a mellow golden lustre, on the pansy-embroidered carpet, and where from the tall crystal vase of Venice ware, a fresh, branching cluster of pale roses exhaled their delicious perfume. El-Râmi stared, but could see nothing,—nothing save the lamp-light and the nodding flowers.

"There?" he repeated bewildered—"Where?"

"Alas for you, that you cannot see her!" said the monk compassionately. "This blindness of your sight proves that for you the veil has not yet been withdrawn. Lilith is there, I tell you;—she stands close to

those roses,—her white form radiates like lightning—her hair is like the glory of the sunshine on amber,—her eyes are bent upon the flowers, which are fully conscious of her shining presence. For flowers are aware of angels' visits, when men see nothing! Round her and above her are the trailing films of light caught from the farthest stars,—she is alone as usual,—her looks are wistful and appealing,—will you not speak to her?"

El-Râmi's surprise, vexation and fear were beyond all words as he heard this description,—then he became scornful and incredulous.

"Speak to her!" he repeated—"Nay—if you see her as plainly as you say—let *her* speak!"

"You will not understand her speech—" said the monk—"Not unless it be conveyed to you in earthly words through that earthly medium there—" and he pointed to the fair form on the couch—"But, otherwise you will not know what she is saying. Nevertheless—if you wish it,—she shall speak."

"I wish nothing—" said El-Râmi quickly and haughtily—"If you imagine you see her,—and if you can command this creature of

your imagination to speak, why do so ; but Lilith as *I* know her, speaks to none save me."

The monk lifted his hands with a solemn movement as of prayer—

"Soul of Lilith !" he said entreatingly—
"Angel-wanderer in the spheres beloved of God—if, by the Master's grace I have seen the vision clearly—speak !"

Silence followed. El-Râmi fixed his eyes on Lilith's visible recumbent form,—no voice could make reply, he thought, save that which must issue from those lovely lips curved close in placid slumber,—but the monk's gaze was fastened in quite an opposite direction. All at once a strain of music, soft as a song played on the water by moonlight, rippled through the room. With mellow richness the cadence rose and fell,—it had a marvellous sweet sound, rhythmical and suggestive of words, —unimaginable words, fairies' language,—anything that was removed from mortal speech, but that was all the same capable of utterance. El-Râmi listened perplexed ;—he had never heard anything so convincingly, almost painfully sweet,—till suddenly it ceased as it had

begun, abruptly, and the monk looked round at him.

"You heard her?" he inquired—"Did you understand?"

"Understand what?" asked El-Râmi impatiently—"I heard music—nothing more."

The monk's eyes rested upon him in grave compassion.

"Your spiritual perception does not go far, El-Râmi Zarânos—" he said gently—"Lilith spoke ;—her voice was the music."

El-Râmi trembled ;—for once his strong nerves were somewhat shaken. The man beside him was one whom he knew to be absolutely truthful, unselfishly wise, — one who scorned "trickery" and who had no motive for deceiving him,—one also who was known to possess a strange and marvelous familiarity with "things unproved and unseen." In spite of his sceptical nature, all he dared assume against his guest, was that he was endowed with a perfervid imagination which persuaded him of the existence of what were really only the "airy nothings" of his brain. The irreproachable grandeur, purity and simplicity of the monk's life as

known among his brethren, were of an ideal perfection never before attempted or attained by man,—and as he met the steady, piercing *faithful* look of his companion's eyes,—clear fine eyes such as, reverently speaking, one might have imagined the Christ to have had when in the guise of humanity He looked love on all the world,—El-Râmi was fairly at a loss for words. Presently he recovered himself sufficiently to speak, though his accents were hoarse and tremulous.

“I will not doubt you ;—” he said slowly—
“But if the Soul of Lilith is here present as you say,—and if it spoke, surely I may know the purport of its language !”

“Surely you may !” replied the monk—
“Ask her in your own way to repeat what she said just now. There—” and he smiled gravely as he pointed to the couch—“there is your human phonograph !”

Perplexed, but willing to solve the mystery, El-Râmi bent above the slumbering girl, and taking her hands in his own, called her by name in his usual manner. The reply came soon—though somewhat faintly.

“I am here !”

“How long have you been here?” asked El-Râmi.

“Since my friend came.”

“Who is that friend, Lilith?”

“One that is near you now—” was the response.

“Did you speak to this friend a while ago?”

“Yes!”

The answer was more like a sigh than an assent.

“Can you repeat what you said?”

Lilith stretched her fair arms out with a gesture of weariness.

“I said I was tired—” she murmured—
“Tired of the search through Infinity for things that are not. A wayward Will bids me look for Evil—I search, but cannot find it;—for Hell, a place of pain and torment,—up and down, around and around the everlasting circles I wend my way, and can discover no such abode of misery. Then I bring back the messages of truth,—but they are rejected, and I am sorrowful. All the realms of God are bright with beauty save this one dark prison of Man’s Fantastic Dream. Why am I bound here? I long

to reach the light!—I am tired of the darkness!” She paused—then added—“This is what I said to one who is my friend.”

Vaguely pained, and stricken with a sudden remorse, El-Râmi asked :

“Am not I your friend, Lilith?”

A shudder ran through her delicate limbs. Then the answer came distinctly, yet reluctantly :

“No!”

El-Râmi dropped her hands as though he had been stung;—his face was very pale. The monk touched him on the shoulder.

“Why are you so moved?” he asked—
“A spirit cannot lie;—an angel cannot flatter. How should she call you friend?—you, who detain her here solely for your own interested purposes?—To you she is a ‘subject’ merely,—no more than the butterfly dissected by the naturalist. The butterfly has hopes, ambitions, loves, delights, innocent wishes, nay even a religion,—what are all these to the grim spectacléd scientist who breaks its delicate wings? The Soul of Lilith, like a climbing flower, strains instinctively upward,—but you—(for a certain time

only) according to the natural magnetic laws which compel the stronger to subdue the weaker, have been able to keep this, her ethereal Essence, a partial captive under your tyrannical dominance. Yes—I say ‘tyrannical,’—great wisdom should inspire love,—but in you it only inspires despotism. Yet with all your skill and calculation you have strangely overlooked one inevitable result of your great Experiment.”

El-Râmi looked up inquiringly but said nothing.

“How it is that you have not foreseen this thing I cannot imagine”—continued the monk—“The body of Lilith has grown under your very eyes from the child to the woman by the merest material means,—the chemicals which Nature gives us, and the forces which Nature allows us to employ. How then should you deem it possible for the Soul to remain stationary?—With every fresh experience its form expands—its desires increase,—its knowledge widens,—and the everlasting Necessity of Love compels its life to Love’s primeval Source. The Soul of Lilith is awakening to its fullest immortal

consciousness,—she realizes her connection with the great angelic worlds—her kindredship with those worlds' inhabitants, and as she gains this glorious knowledge more certainly, so she gains strength. And this is the result I warn you of—her force will soon baffle yours, and you will have no more influence over her than you have over the highest Archangel in the realms of the Supreme Creator."

"A woman's Soul!—only a *woman's* soul, remember that!" said El-Râmi dreamily—"How should it baffle mine? Of slighter character—of more sensitive balance—and always prone to yield,—how should it prove so strong? Though, of course, you will tell me that Souls, like Angels, are sexless."

"I will tell you nothing of the sort"—said the monk quietly. "Because it would not be true. All created things have Sex, even the Angels. 'Male and Female created He them'—recollect that,—when it is said God made Man in 'His Own Image.'"

El-Râmi's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“What! Is it possible you would endow God Himself with the Feminine attributes as well as the Masculine?”

“There are Two Governing Forces of the Universe,” replied the monk deliberately—“One, the masculine, is Love,—the other, feminine, is Beauty. These Two, reigning together, are GOD ;—just as man and wife are One. From Love and Beauty proceed Law and Order. You cannot away with it—it is so. Love and Beauty produce and reproduce a million forms with more than a million variations—and when God made Man in His Own Image, it was as Male and Female. From the very first growths of life in all worlds,—from the small, almost imperceptible beginning of that marvellous Evolution which resulted in Humanity,—evolution which to us is calculated to have taken thousands of years, whereas in the Eternal countings it has occupied but a few moments, Sex was proclaimed in the lowliest sea-plants, of which the only remains we have are in the Silurian formations,—and was equally maintained in the humblest *lingula* inhabiting its simple bivalve shell. Sex is proclaimed

throughout the Universe with an absolute and unswerving regularity through all grades of nature. Nay, there are even Male and Female Atmospheres which when combined produce forms of life."

"You go far,—I should say much too far in your supposed Law!" said El-Râmi wondering and a little derisively.

"And you, my good friend, stop short,—and oppose yourself against all Law, when it threatens to interfere with your work"—retorted the monk—"The proof is, that you are convinced you can keep the Soul of Lilith to wait upon your will at pleasure like another Ariel. Whereas the Law is, that at the destined moment she shall be free. Wise Shakespeare can teach you this,—Prospero had to give his 'fine spirit' liberty in the end. If you could shut Lilith up in her mortal frame again, to live a mortal life, the case might be different; but that you cannot do, since the mortal frame is too dead to be capable of retaining such a Fire-Essence as hers is now."

"You think that?" queried El-Râmi,—

he spoke mechanically,—his thoughts were travelling elsewhere in a sudden new direction of their own.

The monk regarded him with friendly but always compassionate eyes.

“I not only think it—I know it!” he replied.

El-Râmi met his gaze fixedly.

“You would seem to know most things,”—he observed—“Now in this matter I consider that I am more humble-minded than yourself. For I cannot say I ‘know’ anything,—the whole solar system appears to me to be in a gradually changing condition,—and each day one set of facts is followed by another entirely new set which replace the first and render them useless——”

“There is nothing useless,” interposed the monk—“not even a so-called ‘fact’ disproved. Error leads to the discovery of Truth. And Truth always discloses the one great unalterable Fact,—GOD.”

“As I told you, I must have proofs of God”—said El-Râmi with a chill smile—“Proofs that satisfy *me*, personally speaking. At present I believe in Force only.”

“And how is Force generated?” inquired the monk.

“That we shall discover in time. And not only the How, but also the Why. In the meantime we must prove and test all possibilities, both material and spiritual. And as far as such proving goes, I think you can scarcely deny that this experiment of mine on the girl Lilith is a wonderful one?”

“I cannot grant you that ;”—returned the monk gravely—“Most Eastern magnetists can do what you have done, provided they have the necessary Will. To detach the Soul from the body, and yet keep the body alive, is an operation that has been performed by others and will be performed again,—but to keep Body and Soul struggling against each other in unnatural conflict, requires cruelty as well as Will. It is as I before observed, the vivisection of a butterfly. The scientist does not think himself barbarous—but his barbarity outweighs his science all the same.”

“You mean to say there is nothing surprising in my work?”

“Why should there be?” said the monk

curtly—"Barbarism is not wonderful! What is truly a matter for marvel is Yourself. You are the most astonishing example of self-inflicted blindness I have ever known!"

El-Râmi breathed quickly,—he was deeply angered, but he had self-possession enough not to betray it. As he stood, sullenly silent, his guest's hand fell gently on his shoulder—his guest's eyes looked earnest love and pity into his own.

"El-Râmi Zarânos," he said softly—"You know me. You know I would not lie to you. Hear then my words;—As I see a bird on the point of flight, or a flower just ready to break into bloom, even so I see the Soul of Lilith. She is on the verge of the Eternal Light—its rippling wave,—the great sweet wave that lifts us upward,—has already touched her delicate consciousness,—her aerial organism. You—with your brilliant brain, your astonishing grasp and power over material forces—you are on the verge of darkness,—such a gulf of it as cannot be measured—such a depth as cannot be sounded. Why will you fall? Why do you choose Darkness rather than Light?"

“Because my ‘deeds are evil,’ I suppose,” retorted El - Râmi bitterly — “You should finish the text while you are about it. I think you misjudge me,—however, you have not heard all. You consider my labour as vain, and my experiment futile,—but I have some strange results yet to show you in writing. And what I have written I desire to place in your hands that you may take all to the monastery, and keep my discoveries,—if they *are* discoveries, among the archives. What may seem the wildest notions to the scientists of to-day may prove of practical utility hereafter.”

He paused, and bending over Lilith, took her hand and called her by name. The reply came rather more quickly than usual.

“I am here!”

“Be here no longer, Lilith”—said El-Râmi, speaking with unusual gentleness,—“Go home to that fair garden you love, on the high hills of the bright world called Alcyone. There rest, and be happy till I summon you to earth again.”

He released her hand,—it fell limply in its usual position on her breast,—and her face

became white and rigid as sculptured marble. He watched her lying so for a minute or two, then turning to the monk, observed—

“She has left us at once, as you see. Surely you will own that I do not grudge her her liberty?”

“Her liberty is not complete”—said the monk quietly—“Her happiness therefore is only temporary.”

El-Râmi shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

“What does that matter if, as you declare, her time of captivity is soon to end? According to your prognostications she will ere long set herself free.”

The monk’s fine eyes flashed forth a calm and holy triumph.

“Most assuredly she will!”

El-Râmi looked at him and seemed about to make some angry retort, but checking himself, he bowed with a kind of mingled submissiveness and irony, saying—

“I will not be so discourteous as to doubt your word! But—I would only remind you that nothing in this world is certain——”

“Except the Law of God!” interrupted

the monk with passionate emphasis—"That is immutable,—and against that, El-Râmi Zarânos, you contend in vain! Opposed to that, your strength and power must come to naught,—and all they who wonder at your skill and wisdom shall by-and-by ask one another the old question—'*What went ye out for to see?*' And the answer shall describe your fate—'*A reed shaken by the wind!*'"

He turned away as he spoke and without another look at the beautiful Lilith, he left the room. El-Râmi stood irresolute for a moment, thinking deeply,—then, touching the bell which would summon Zaroba back to her usual duty of watching the tranced girl, he swiftly followed his mysterious guest





CHAPTER II.

HE found him quietly seated in the study, close beside the window, which he had thrown open for air. The rain had ceased,—a few stars shone out in the misty sky, and there was a fresh smell of earth and grass and flowers, as though all were suddenly growing together by some new impetus.

“ ‘The winter is past,—the rain is over and gone!—Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!’ ” quoted the monk softly, half to himself and half to El-Râmi as he saw the latter enter the room—“ Even in this great and densely peopled city of London, Nature sends her messengers of spring—see here !”

And he held out on his hand a delicate

insect with shining iridescent wings that glistened like jewels.

“This creature flew in as I opened the window,” he continued, surveying it tenderly. “What quaint and charming stories of Flower-land it could tell us if we could but understand its language! Of the poppy-palaces, and rose-leaf saloons coloured through by the kindly sun,—of the loves of the lady-birds and the political controversies of the bees! How dare we make a boast of wisdom!—this tiny denizen of air baffles us—it knows more than we do.”

“With regard to the things of its own sphere it knows more, doubtless,” said El-Râmi—“but concerning *our* part of creation, it knows less. These things are equally balanced. You seem to me to be more of a poet than either a devotee or a scientist.”

“Perhaps I am!” and the monk smiled, as he carefully wafted the pretty insect out into the darkness of the night again—“Yet poets are often the best scientists, because they never *know* they are scientists. They arrive by a sudden intuition at the facts which it takes several Professors Dry-as-

Dust years to discover. When once you feel you are a scientist, it is all over with you. You are a clever biped who has got hold of a crumb out of the Universal Loaf, and for all your days afterwards you are turning that crumb over and over under your analytical lens. But a poet takes up the whole Loaf unconsciously, and hands portions of it about at haphazard and with the abstracted behaviour of one in a dream,—a wild and extravagant process,—but then, what would you?—his nature could not do with a crumb. No—I dare not call myself ‘poet’; if I gave myself any title at all, I would say, with all humbleness, that I am a sympathizer.”

“You do not sympathize with *me*,” observed El-Râmi gloomily.

“My friend, at the immediate moment, you do not need my sympathy. You are sufficient for yourself. But, should you ever make a claim upon me, be sure I shall not fail.”

He spoke earnestly and cheerily, and smiled,—but El-Râmi did not return the smile. He was bending over a deep drawer

in his writing-table, and after a little search he took out two bulky rolls of manuscript tied and sealed.

“Look there!” he said, indicating the titles with an air of triumph.

The monk obeyed and read aloud :

“ ‘The Inhabitants of Sirius. Their Laws, Customs, and Progress.’ Well?”

“Well!” echoed El-Râmi.—“Is such information, gained from Lilith in her wanderings, of *no* value?”

The monk made no direct reply, but read the title of the second MS.

“ ‘The World of Neptune. How it is composed of One Thousand Distinct Nations, united under one reigning Emperor, known at the present era as Ustalvian the Tenth.’ And again I say—well? What of all this, except to hazard the remark that Ustalvian is a great creature, and supports his responsibilities admirably?”

El-Râmi gave a gesture of irritation and impatience.

“Surely it must interest you?” he said.

“Surely you cannot have known these things positively——”

“Stop, stop, my friend!” interposed the monk.—“Do *you* know them *positively*? Do you accept any of Lilith’s news as *positive*? Come,—you are honest—confess you do not! You cannot believe her, though you are puzzled to make out as to where she obtains information which has certainly nothing to do with this world, or any external impression. And that is why she is really a Sphinx to you still, in spite of your power over her. As for being interested, of course I am interested. It is impossible not to be interested in everything, even in the development of a grub. But you have not made any discovery that is specially new—to *me*. I have my own Messenger!” He raised his eyes one moment with a brief devout glance—then resumed quietly—“There are other ‘detached’ spirits, besides that of your Lilith, who have found their way to some of the planets, and have returned to tell the tale. In one of our monasteries we have a very exact description of Mars obtained in this same way—its landscapes, its cities, its people, its various nations—all very concisely given. These are but the beginnings of

discoveries—the feeling for the Clue,—the Clue itself will be found one day.”

“The Clue to what?” demanded El-Râmi. “To the stellar mysteries, or to Life’s mystery?”

“To everything!” replied the monk firmly. “To everything that seems unclear and perplexing now. It will all be unravelled for us in such a simple way that we shall wonder why we did not discover it before. As I told you, my friend, I am, above all things, a *sympathizer*. I sympathize—God knows how deeply and passionately,—with what I may call the unexplained woe of the world. The other day I visited a poor fellow who had lost his only child. He told me he could believe in nothing,—he said that what people call the goodness of God was only cruelty. ‘Why take this boy!’ he cried, rocking the pretty little corpse to and fro on his breast—‘Why rob me of the chief thing I had to live for? Oh, if I only *knew*—as positively as I know day is day, and night is night—that I should see my living child again, and possess his love in another world than this, should I repine as I do? No,—I should

believe in God's wisdom,—and I should try to be a good man instead of a bad. But it is because I do not know, that I am broken-hearted. If there is a God, surely He might have given us some little *certain* clue by way of help and comfort!" Thus he wailed,—and my heart ached for him. Nevertheless, the clue is to be had,—and I believe it will be found suddenly in some little, deeply-hidden unguessed Law,—we are on the track of it, and I fancy we shall soon find it."

"Ah!—and what of the millions of creatures who, in the bygone eras, having no clue, have passed away without any sort of comfort?" asked El-Râmi.

"Nature takes time to manifest her laws," replied the monk.—"And it must be remembered that what *we* call 'time' is not Nature's counting at all. The method Nature has of counting time may be faintly guessed by proven scientific fact,—as, for instance, take the Comet which appeared in 1744. Strict mathematicians calculated that this brilliant world (for it is a world) needs 122,683 years to perform one single circuit! And yet the circuit of a Comet is surely not so much

time to allow for God and Nature to declare a Meaning !”

El-Râmi shuddered slightly.

“All the same, it is horrible to think of,” he said.—“All those enormous periods,—those eternal vastnesses ! For, during the 122,683 years we die, and pass into the Silence.”

“Into the Silence or the Explanation ?” queried the monk softly.—“For there *is* an Explanation,—and we are all bound to know it at some time or other, else Creation would be but a poor and bungling business.”

“If *we* are bound to know,” said El-Râmi, “then every living creature is bound to know, since every living creature suffers cruelly, in wretched ignorance of the cause of its suffering. To every atom, no matter how infinitely minute, must be given this ‘explanation,’—to dogs and birds as well as men—nay, even to flowers must be declared the meaning of the mystery.”

“Unless the flowers know already !” suggested the monk with a smile.—“Which is quite possible !”

“Oh, everything is ‘possible’ according

to your way of thinking," said El-Râmi somewhat impatiently. "If one is a visionary, one would scarcely be surprised to see the legended 'Jacob's ladder' leaning against that dark midnight sky and the angels descending and ascending upon it. And so—" here he touched the two rolls of manuscript lying on the table—"you find no use in these?"

"I personally have no use for them," responded his guest,—“but as you desire it, I will take charge of them and place them in safe keeping at the monastery. Every little link helps to forge the chain of discovery, of course. By the way, while on this subject, I must not forget to speak to you about poor old Kremlin. I had a letter from him about two months ago. I very much fear that famous Disc of his will be his ruin.”

"Such an intimation will console him vastly!" observed El-Râmi sarcastically.

"Consolation has nothing to do with the matter. If a man rushes wilfully into danger, danger will not move itself out of the way for him. I always told Kremlin that his proposed design was an unsafe one, even

before he went out to Africa fifteen years ago in search of the magnetic spar—a crystal-line formation whose extraordinary reflection-power he learned from me. However, it must be admitted that he has come marvelously close to the unravelling of the enigma at which he works. And when you see him next you may tell him from me, that if he can—mind, it is a very big ‘if’—if he can follow the movements of the Third Ray on his Disc he will be following the signals from Mars. To make out the meaning of those signals is quite another matter—but he can safely classify them as the light-vibrations from that particular planet.”

“How is he to tell which is the Third Ray that falls, among a fleeting thousand?” asked El-Râmi dubiously.

“It will be difficult of course, but he can try,” returned the monk.—“Let him first cover the Disc with thick, dark drapery, and then when it is face to face with the stars in the zenith, uncover it quickly, keeping his eyes fixed on its surface. In one minute there will be three distinct flashes—the third is from Mars. Let him endeavour to follow

that third ray in its course on the Disc, and probably he will arrive at something worth remark. This suggestion I offer by way of assisting him, for his patient labour is both wonderful and pathetic,—but,—it would be far better and wiser were he to resign his task altogether. Yet — who knows! — the ordained end may be the best!"

"And do you know this 'ordained end'?" questioned El-Râmi.

The monk met his incredulous gaze calmly.

"I know it as I know yours," he replied. "As I know my own, and the end (or beginning) of all those who are, or who have been, in any way connected with my life and labours."

"How *can* you know!" exclaimed El-Râmi brusquely.—"Who is there to tell you these things that are surely hidden in the future?"

"Even as a picture already hangs in an artist's brain before it is painted," said the monk,— "so does every scene of each human unit's life hang, embryo-like, in air and space, in light and colour. Explanations of these

things are well-nigh impossible—it is not given to mortal speech to tell them. One must *see*,—and to see clearly, one must not become wilfully blind.” He paused,—then added—“For instance, El-Râmi, I would that you could see this room as I see it.”

El-Râmi looked about half carelessly, half wonderingly.

“And do I not?” he asked.

The monk stretched out his hand.

“Tell me first,—is there anything visible between this my extended arm and you?”

El-Râmi shook his head.

“Nothing.”

Whereupon the monk raised his eyes, and in a low thrilling voice said solemnly—

“O God with whom Thought is Creation and Creation Thought, for one brief moment, be pleased to lift material darkness from the sight of this man Thy subject-creature, and by Thy sovereign-power permit him to behold with mortal eyes, in mortal life, Thy deathless Messenger!”

Scarcely had these words been pronounced than El-Râmi was conscious of a blinding flash of fire as though sudden lightning had

struck the room from end to end. Confused and dazzled, he instinctively covered his eyes with his hand, then removing it, looked up, stupefied, speechless, and utterly overwhelmed at what he saw. Clear before him stood a wondrous Shape, seemingly human, yet unlike humanity,—a creature apparently composed of radiant colour, from whose transcendent form, great shafts of gold and rose and purple spread upward and around in glowing lines of glory. This marvellous Being stood, or rather was poised in a stedfast attitude, between him, El-Râmi, and the monk,—its luminous hands were stretched out on either side as though to keep those twain asunder—its starry eyes expressed an earnest watchfulness—its majestic patience never seemed to tire. A thing of royal stateliness and power, it stayed there immovable, parting with its radiant intangible Presence the two men who gazed upon it, one with fearless, reverent, yet accustomed eyes—the other with a dazzled and bewildered stare. Another moment and El-Râmi at all risks would have spoken,—but that the Shining Figure lifted its light-crowned head and gazed at him.

The wondrous look appalled him,—unnerved him,—the straight, pure brilliancy and limpid lustre of those unearthly orbs sent shudders through him,—he gasped for breath—thrust out his hands, and fell on his knees in a blind, unconscious, swooning act of adoration, mingled with a sense of awe and something like despair,—when a dense chill darkness as of death closed over him, and he remembered nothing more.





CHAPTER III.

WHEN he came to himself, it was full daylight. His head was resting on someone's knee,—someone was sprinkling cold water on his face and talking to him in an incoherent mingling of Arabic and English,—who was that someone? Féraz? Yes!—surely it was Féraz! Opening his eyes languidly, he stared about him and attempted to rise.

“What is the matter?” he asked faintly. “What are you doing to me? I am quite well, am I not?”

“Yes, yes!” cried Féraz eagerly, delighted to hear him speak.—“You are well,—it was a swoon that seized you—nothing more! But I was anxious,—I found you here, insensible——”

With an effort El-Râmi rose to his feet, steadying himself on his brother's arm.

"Insensible!" he repeated vaguely.—"Insensible!—that is strange!—I must have been very weak and tired—and overpowered. But,—where is He?"

"If you mean the Master," said Férâz, lowering his voice to an almost awe-stricken whisper—"He has gone, and left no trace,—save that sealed paper there upon your table."

El-Râmi shook himself free of his brother's hold and hurried forward to possess himself of the indicated missive,—seizing it, he tore it quickly open,—it contained but one line—*"Beware the end! With Lilith's love comes Lilith's freedom."*

That was all. He read it again and again—then deliberately striking a match, he set fire to it and burnt it to ashes. A rapid glance round showed him that the manuscripts concerning Neptune and Sirius were gone,—the mysterious monk had evidently taken them with him as desired. Then he turned again to his brother.

"When could he have gone?" he de-

manded.—“Did you not hear the street-door open and shut?—no sound at all of his departure?”

Féraz shook his head.

“I slept heavily,” he said apologetically. “But in my dreams it seemed as though a hand touched me, and I awoke. The sun was shining brilliantly—someone called ‘Féraz! Féraz!’—I thought it was your voice, and I hurried into the room to find you, as I thought, dead,—oh! the horror of that moment of suspense!”

El-Râmi looked at him kindly, and smiled.

“Why feel horror, my dear boy?” he inquired.—“Death—or what we call death,—is the best possible fortune for everybody. Even if there were no Afterwards, it would still be an End—an end of trouble and tedium and infinite uncertainty. Could anything be happier?—I doubt it!”

And sighing, he threw himself into his chair with an air of exhaustion. Féraz stood a little apart, gazing at him somewhat wistfully—then he spoke—

“I too have thought that, El-Râmi,” he

said softly.—“As to whether this End, which the world and all men dread, might not be the best thing? And yet my own personal sensations tell me that life means something good for me if I only learn how best to live it.”

“Youth, my dear fellow!” said El-Râmi lightly. “Delicious youth,—which you share in common with the scampering colt who imagines all the meadows of the world were made for him to race upon. This is the potent charm which persuades you that life is agreeable. But unfortunately it will pass,—this rosy morning-glory. And the older you grow the wiser and the sadder you will be,—I, your brother, am an excellent example of the truth of this platitude.”

“You are not old,” replied Féraz quickly. “But certainly you are often sad. You overwork your brain. For example, last night of course you did not sleep—will you sleep now?”

“No—I will breakfast,” said El-Râmi, rousing himself to seem cheerful.—“A good cup of coffee is one of the boons of existence—and no one can make it as you do. It

will put the finishing touch to my complete recovery."

Féraz took this hint, and hastened off to prepare the desired beverage, — while El-Râmi, left alone, sat for a few moments wrapped in a deep reverie. His thoughts reverted to and dwelt upon the strange and glorious Figure he had seen standing in that very room between him and the monk,—he wondered doubtfully if such a celestial visitant were anywhere near him now? Shaking off the fantastic impression, he got up and walked to and fro.

"What a fool I am!" he exclaimed half-aloud—"As if *my* eyes could not be as much deluded for once in a way, as the eyes of anyone else! It was a strange shape,—a marvellously divine-looking apparition;—but *he* evolved it—he is as great a master in the art of creating phantasma as Moses himself, and could, if he chose, make thunder echo at his will on another Mount Sinai. Upon my word, the things that men *can* do are as wonderful as the things that they would fain attempt; and the only miraculous part of this particular man's force is that he should have

overpowered ME, seeing I am so strong. And then one other marvel,—(if it be true)—he could *see* the Soul of Lilith.”

Here he came to a full stop in his walk, and with his eyes fixed on vacancy he repeated musingly—

“He could *see* the Soul of Lilith. If that is so—if that is possible, then I will see it too, if I die in the attempt. To *see* the Soul—to look upon it and know its form—to discern the manner of its organization, would surely be to prove it. Sight can be deceived, we know—we look upon a star (or think we look upon it), that may have disappeared some thirty thousand years ago, as it takes thirty thousand years for its reflex to reach us—all that is true—but there are ways of guarding against deception.”

He had now struck upon a new line of thought,—ideas more daring than he had ever yet conceived began to flit through his brain,—and when Féraz came in with the breakfast he partook of that meal with avidity and relish, his excellent appetite entirely reassuring his brother with regard to his health.

"You are right, Féraz," he said, as he sipped his coffee.—"Life can be made enjoyable after a fashion, no doubt. But the best way to get enjoyment out of it is to be always at work—always putting a brick in to help the universal architecture."

Féraz was silent. El-Râmi looked at him inquisitively.

"Don't you agree with me?" he asked.

"No—not entirely"—and Féraz pushed the clustering hair off his brow with a slightly troubled gesture.—"Work may become as monotonous and wearisome as anything else if we have too much of it. If we are always working—that is, if we are always obtruding ourselves into affairs and thinking they cannot get on without us, we make an obstruction in the way, I think—we are not a help. Besides, we leave ourselves no time to absorb suggestions, and I fancy a great deal is learned by simply keeping the brain quiet and absorbing light."

"Absorbing light?" queried his brother perplexedly—"What do you mean?"

"Well, it is difficult to explain my meaning," said Féraz with hesitation—

“but yet I feel there is truth in what I try to express. You see, everything absorbs something, and you will assuredly admit that the brain absorbs certain impressions?”

“Of course,—but impressions are not ‘light’?”

“Are they not? Not even the effects of light? Then what is the art of photography? However, I do not speak of the impressions received from our merely external surroundings. If you can relieve the brain from *conscious* thought,—if you have the power to shake off outward suggestions and be willing to think of nothing personal, your brain will receive impressions which are to some extent new, and with which you actually have very little connection. It is strange,—but it is so;—you become obediently receptive, and perhaps wonder where your ideas come from. I say they are the result of light. Light can use up immense periods of time in travelling from a far distant star into our area of vision, and yet at last we see it,—shall not God’s inspiration travel at a far swifter pace than star-beams, and reach the human brain as surely? This

thought has often startled me,—it has filled me with an almost apprehensive awe,—the capabilities it opens up are so immense and wonderful. Even a man can suggest ideas to his fellow-man and cause them to germinate in the mind and blossom into action,—how can we deny to God the power to do the same? And so,—imagine it!—the first strain of the glorious ‘Tannhauser’ may have been played on the harps of Heaven, and rolling sweetly through infinite space may have touched in fine far echoes the brain of the musician who afterwards gave it form and utterance—ah yes!—I would love to think it were so!—I would love to think that nothing,—nothing is truly ours; but that all the marvels of poetry, of song, of art, of colour, of beauty, were only the echoes and distant impressions of that Eternal Grandeur which comes hereafter!”

His eyes flashed with all a poet’s enthusiasm,—he rose from the table and paced the room excitedly, while his brother, sitting silent, watched him meditatively.

“El-Râmi, you have no idea,” he continued—“of the wonders and delights of

the land I call my Star! You think it is a dream—an unexplained portion of a splendid trance,—and I am now fully aware of what I owe to your magnetic influence,—your forceful spell that rests upon my life;—but see you!—when I am alone—quite, quite alone, when you are absent from me, when you are not influencing me, it is then I see the landscapes best,—it is then I hear my people sing! I let my brain rest;—as far as it is possible, I think of nothing,—then suddenly upon me falls the ravishment and ecstasy,—this world rolls up as it were in a whirling cloud and vanishes, and lo! I find myself at home. There is a stretch of forest-land in this Star of mine,—a place all dusky green with shadows, and musical with the fall of silvery waters,—that is my favourite haunt when I am there, for it leads me on and on through grasses and tangles of wild flowers to what I know and feel must be my own abode, where I should rest and sleep if sleep were needful; but this abode I never reach; I am debarred from entering in, and I do not know the reason why. The other day, when wandering there, I met two maidens

bearing flowers,—they stopped, regarding me with pleased yet doubting eyes, and one said—‘Look you, our lord is now returned!’ And the other sighed and answered—‘Nay! he is still an exile and may not stay with us.’ Whereupon they bent their heads, and shrinking past me, disappeared. When I would have called them back I woke!—to find that this dull earth was once again my house of bondage.”

El-Râmi heard him with patient interest.

“I do not deny, Féraz,” he said slowly, “that your impressions are very strange——”

“Very strange? Yes!” cried Féraz. “But very true!”

He paused—then on a sudden impulse came close up to his brother, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“And do you mean to tell me,” he asked, “that you who have studied so much, and have mastered so much, yet receive *no* such impressions as those I speak of?”

A faint flush coloured El-Râmi’s olive skin.

“Certain impressions come to me at times, of course,” he answered slowly.—“And there

have been certain seasons in my life when I have had visions of the impossible. But I have a coldly - tempered organization, Féraz,—I am able to reason these things away."

"Oh, you can reason the whole world away if you choose," said Féraz.—"For it is nothing after all but a pinch of star-dust."

"If you can reason a thing away it does not exist," observed El-Râmi dryly.—"Reduce the world, as you say, to a pinch of star-dust, still the pinch of star-dust is *there*—it Exists."

"Some people doubt even that!" said Féraz, smiling.

"Well, everything can be over-done," replied his brother,—"even the process of reasoning. We can, if we choose, 'reason' ourselves into madness. There is a boundary-line to every science which the human intellect dare not overstep."

"I wonder what and where is *your* boundary-line?" questioned Féraz lightly.—"Have you laid one down for yourself at all? Surely not!—for you are too ambitious."

El-Râmi made no answer to this observation, but betook himself to his books and papers. Férâz meanwhile set the room in order and cleared away the breakfast,—and these duties done, he quietly withdrew. Left to himself, El-Râmi took from the centre drawer of his writing-table a medium-sized manuscript book which was locked, and which he opened by means of a small key that was attached to his watch-chain, and bending over the title-page he critically examined it. Its heading ran thus—

THE NEW RELIGION.

A Reasonable Theory of Worship conformable to the Eternal and Unalterable Laws of Nature.

“The title does not cover all the ground,” he murmured as he read.—“And yet how am I to designate it? It is a vast subject, and presents different branches of treatment, and after all said and done, I may have wasted my time in planning it. Most likely I have,—but there is no scientist living who would refuse to accept it. The question is,

shall I ever finish it?—shall I ever know positively that there IS without doubt, a Conscious, Personal Something or Someone after death who enters at once upon another existence? My new experiment will decide all—if I *see* the Soul of Lilith, all hesitation will be at an end—I shall be sure of everything which now seems uncertain. And then the triumph!—then the victory!”

His eyes sparkled, and dipping his pen in the ink he prepared to write, but ere he did so the message which the monk had left for him to read, recurred with a chill warning to his memory,—

“Beware the end! With Lilith’s love comes Lilith’s freedom.”

He considered the words for a moment apprehensively,—and then a proud smile played round his mouth.

“For a Master who has attained to some degree of wisdom, his intuition is strangely erroneous this time,” he muttered.—“For if there be any dream of love in Lilith, that dream, that love is Mine! And being mine, who shall dispute possession,—who shall take her from me? No one,—not even

God,—for He does not break through the laws of Nature. And by those laws I have kept Lilith—and even so I will keep her still.”

Satisfied with his own conclusions, he began to write, taking up the thread of his theory of religion where he had left it on the previous day. He had a brilliant and convincing style, and was soon deep in an elaborate and eloquent disquisition on the superior scientific reasoning contained in the ancient Eastern faiths, as compared with the modern scheme of Christianity, which limits God's power to this world only, and takes no consideration of the fate of other visible and far more splendid spheres.





CHAPTER IV.

THE few days immediately following the visit of the mysterious monk from Cyprus were quiet and uneventful enough. El-Râmi led the life of a student and recluse ; Féraz, too, occupied himself with books and music, thinking much, but saying little. He had solemnly sworn never again to make allusion to the forbidden subject of his brother's great experiment, and he meant to keep his vow. For though he had in very truth absolutely forgotten the name " Lilith," he had not forgotten the face of her whose beauty had surprised his senses and dazzled his brain. She had become to him a nameless Wonder, —and from the sweet remembrance of her loveliness he gained a certain consolation and pleasure which he jealously and religiously

kept to himself. He thought of her as a poet may think of an ideal goddess seen in a mystic dream,—but he never ventured to ask a question concerning her. And even if he had wished to do so,—even if he had indulged the idea of encouraging Zaroba to follow up the work she had begun by telling him all she could concerning the beautiful tranced girl, that course was now impossible. For Zaroba seemed stricken dumb as well as deaf,—what had chanced to her he could not tell,—but a mysterious silence possessed her ; and though her large black eyes were sorrowfully eloquent, she never uttered a word. She came and went on various household errands, always silently and with bent head,—she looked older, feebler, wearier and sadder, but not so much as a gesture escaped her that could be construed into a complaint. Once Féráz made signs to her of inquiry after her health and well-being—she smiled mournfully, but gave no other response, and turning away, left him hurriedly. He mused long and deeply upon all this,—and though he felt sure that Zaroba's strange but resolute

speechlessness was his brother's work, he dared not speculate too far or inquire too deeply. For he fully recognised El-Râmi's power,—a power so scientifically balanced, and used with such terrible and unerring precision, that there could be no opposition possible unless one were of equal strength and knowledge. Féraz knew he could no more compete with such a force than a mouse can wield a thunderbolt,—he therefore deemed it best to resign himself to his destiny and wait the course of events.

“For,” he said within himself, “it is not likely one man should be permitted to use such strange authority over natural forces long,—it may be that God is trying him,—putting him to the proof, as it were, to find out how far he will dare to go,—and then—ah then!—*what* then? If his heart were dedicated to the service of God I should not fear—but—as it is,—I dread the end!”

His instinct was correct in this,—for in spite of his poetic and fanciful temperament, he had plenty of quick perception, and he saw plainly what El-Râmi himself was not very willing to recognise,—namely, that in all

the labour of his life, so far as it had gone, he, El-Râmi, had rather opposed himself to the Unseen Divine, than striven to incorporate himself with it. He preferred to believe in Natural Force only; his inclination was to deny the possibility of anything behind That. He accepted the idea of Immortality to a certain extent, because Natural Force was forever giving him proofs of the perpetual regeneration of life—but that there was a Primal Source of this generating influence,—One, great and eternal, who would demand an account of all lives, and an accurate summing-up of all words and actions,—in this, though he might assume the virtue of faith, Férâz very well knew he had it not. Like the greater majority of scientists and natural philosophers generally, what Self could comprehend, he accepted,—but all that extended beyond Self,—all that made of Self but a grain of dust in a vast infinitude,—all that forced the Creature to prostrate himself humbly before the Creator and cry out “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!” this he tacitly and proudly rejected. For which reasons the gentle,

dreamy Féraz had good cause to fear,—and a foreboding voice forever whispered in his mind that man without God was as a world without light,—a black chaos of blank unfruitfulness.

With the ensuing week the grand “reception” to which El-Râmi and his brother had been invited by Lord Melthorpe came off with great *éclat*. Lady Melthorpe’s “crushes” were among the most brilliant of the season, and this one was particularly so, as it was a special function held for the entertainment of the distinguished Crown Prince of a great nation. True, the distinguished Crown Prince was only “timed” to look in a little after midnight for about ten minutes, but the exceeding brevity of his stay was immaterial to the fashionable throng. All that was needed was just the piquant flavour,—the “passing” of a Royal Presence,—to make the gathering socially complete. The rooms were crowded—so much so indeed that it was difficult to take note of any one person in particular, yet in spite of this fact, there was a very general movement of interest and admiration when El-Râmi entered with his

young and handsome brother beside him. Both had a look and manner too distinctly striking to escape observation :—their olive complexions, black melancholy eyes, and slim yet stately figures, were set off to perfection by the richness of the Oriental dresses they wore ; and the grave composure and perfect dignity of their bearing offered a pleasing contrast to the excited pushing, waddling, and scrambling indulged in by the greater part of the aristocratic assemblage. Lady Melthorpe herself, a rather pretty woman attired in a very æsthetic gown, and wearing her brown hair all towzled and arranged “à la Grecque” in diamond bandeaux, caught sight of them at once, and was delighted. Such picturesque-looking creatures were really ornaments to a room, she thought with much interior satisfaction ; and wreathing her face with smiles, she glided up to them.

“I am so charmed, my dear El-Râmi!” she said, holding out her jewelled hand.—“So charmed to see *you*—you so very seldom will come to me! *And* your brother! So glad! Why did you never tell me you had

a brother? Naughty man! What is your brother's name? Féraz? Delightful!—it makes me think of Hafiz and Sadi and all those very charming Eastern people. I must find someone interesting to introduce to you. Will you wait here a minute—the crowd is so thick in the centre of the room that really I'm afraid you will not be able to get through it—*do* wait here, and I'll bring the Baroness to you—don't you know the Baroness? Oh, she's such a delightful creature—so clever at palmistry! Yes—just stay where you are, — I'll come back directly!"

And with sundry good-humoured nods her ladyship swept away, while Féraz glanced at his brother with an expression of amused inquiry.

"That is Lady Melthorpe?" he asked.

"That is Lady Melthorpe," returned El-Râmi—"our hostess, and Lord Melthorpe's wife; his, 'to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honour and cherish till death do them part,'" and he smiled somewhat satirically.—"It seems odd, doesn't

it?—I mean, such solemn words sound out of place sometimes. Do you like her?"

Féraz made a slight sign in the negative.

"She does not speak sincerely," he said in a low tone.

El-Râmi laughed.

"My dear boy, you mustn't expect anyone to be 'sincere' in society. You said you wanted to 'see life'—very well, but it will never do to begin by viewing it in that way. An outburst of actual sincerity in this human *mêlée*"—and he glanced comprehensively over the brilliant throng—"would be like a match to a gunpowder magazine—the whole thing would blow up into fragments and be dispersed to the four winds of heaven, leaving nothing behind but an evil odour."

"Better so," said Féraz dreamily, "than that false hearts should be mistaken for true."

El-Râmi looked at him wistfully;—what a beautiful youth he really was, with all that glow of thought and feeling in his dark eyes! How different was his aspect to that of the jaded, cynical, vice-worn young men

of fashion, some of whom were pushing their way past at that moment,—men in the twenties who had the air of being well on in the forties, and badly preserved at that—wretched, pallid, languid, exhausted creatures who had thrown away the splendid jewel of their youth in a couple of years' stupid dissipation and folly. At that moment Lord Melthorpe, smiling and cordial, came up to them and shook hands warmly, and then introduced with a few pleasant words a gentleman who had accompanied him as,—“Roy Ainsworth, the famous artist, you know !”

“Oh, not at all !” drawled the individual thus described, with a searching glance at the two brothers from under his drowsy eyelids.—“Not famous by any means—not yet. Only trying to be. You've got to paint something startling and shocking nowadays before you are considered ‘famous’ ;—and even then, when you've outraged all the proprieties, you must give a banquet, or take a big house and hold receptions, or have an electrically lit-up skeleton in your studio, or something of that sort, to keep the public

attention fixed upon you. It's such a restless age."

El-Râmi smiled gravely.

"The feverish outburst of an unnatural vitality immediately preceding dissolution," he observed.

"Ah!—you think that? Well—it may be,—I'm sure I hope it is. I personally should be charmed to believe in the rapidly-approaching end of the world. We really need a change of planet as much as certain invalids require a change of air. Your brother, however"—and here he flashed a keen glance at Féraz—"seems already to belong to quite a different sphere."

Féraz looked up with a pleased yet startled expression.

"Yes,—but how did you know it?" he asked.

It was now the artist's turn to be embarrassed. He had used the words "different sphere" merely as a figure of speech, whereas this intelligent-looking young fellow evidently took the phrase in a literal sense. It was very odd!—and he hesitated what to answer, so El-Râmi came to the rescue.

“Mr. Ainsworth only means that you do not look quite like other people, Féráz, that’s all. Poets and musicians often carry their own distinctive mark.”

“Is he a poet?” inquired Lord Melthorpe with interest.—“And has he published anything?”

El-Râmi laughed good-humouredly.

“Not he! My dear Lord Melthorpe, we are not all called upon to give the world our blood and brain and nerve and spirit. Some few reserve their strength for higher latitudes. To give greedy Humanity everything of one’s self is rather too prodigal an expenditure.”

“I agree with you,” said a chill yet sweet voice close to them.—“It was Christ’s way of work,—and quite too unwise an example for any of us to follow.”

Lord Melthorpe and Mr. Ainsworth turned quickly to make way for the speaker,—a slight fair woman, with a delicate thoughtful face full of light, languor, and scorn, who, clad in snowy draperies adorned here and there with the cold sparkle of diamonds, drew near them at the moment. El-Râmi and

his brother both noted her with interest,—she was so different from the other women present.

“I am delighted to see you!” said Lord Melthorpe as he held out his hand in greeting.—“It is so seldom we have the honour! Mr. Ainsworth you already know,—let me introduce my Oriental friends here,—El-Râmi Zarânos and his brother Fêraz Zarânos,—Madame Irene Vassilius—you must have heard of her very often.”

El-Râmi had indeed heard of her,—she was an authoress of high repute, noted for her brilliant satirical pen, her contempt of press-criticism, and her influence over, and utter indifference to, all men. Therefore he regarded her now with a certain pardonable curiosity as he made her his profoundest salutation, while she returned his look with equal interest.

“It is you who said that we must not give ourselves wholly away to the needs of Humanity, is it not?” she said, letting her calm eyes dwell upon him with a dreamy yet searching scrutiny.

“I certainly did say so, Madame,” replied

El-Râmi.—“It is a waste of life,—and Humanity is always ungrateful.”

“You have proved it? But perhaps you have not tried to deserve its gratitude.”

This was rather a home thrust, and El-Râmi was surprised and vaguely annoyed at its truth. Irene Vassilius still stood quietly observing him,—then she turned to Roy Ainsworth.

“There is the type you want for your picture,” she said, indicating Féraz by a slight gesture.—“That boy, depicted in the clutches of your Phryne, would make angels weep.”

“If I could make *you* weep I should have achieved something like success,” replied the painter, his dreamy eyes dilating with a passion he could not wholly conceal.—“But icebergs neither smile nor shed tears,—and intellectual women are impervious to emotion.”

“That is a mistaken idea,—one of the narrow notions common to men,” she answered, waving her fan idly to and fro.—“You remind me of the querulous Edward Fitzgerald, who wrote that he was glad

Mrs. Barrett - Browning was dead, because there would be no more 'Aurora Leighs.' He condescended to say she was a 'woman of Genius,' but what was the use of it? She and her Sex, he said, would be better minding the Kitchen and their Children. He and *his* Sex always consider the terrible possibilities to themselves of a badly cooked dinner and a baby's screams. His notion about the limitation of Woman's sphere, is Man's notion generally."

"It is not mine," said Lord Melthorpe.—
"I think women are cleverer than men."

"Ah, you are not a reviewer!" laughed Madame Vassilius—"so you can afford to be generous. But as a rule men detest clever women, simply because they are jealous of them."

"They have cause to be jealous of *you*," said Roy Ainsworth.—"You succeed in everything you touch."

"Success is easy," she replied indifferently.—"Resolve upon it, and carry out that resolve—and the thing is done."

El-Râmi looked at her with new interest.

"Madame, you have a strong will!" he

observed.—“ But permit me to say that all your sex are not like yourself, beautiful, gifted, and resolute at one and the same time. The majority of women are deplorably unintelligent and uninteresting.”

“ That is precisely how I find the majority of men!” declared Irene Vassilius, with that little soft laugh of hers which was so sweet, yet so full of irony.—“ You see, we view things from different standpoints. Moreover, the deplorably unintelligent and uninteresting women are the very ones you men elect to marry, and make the mothers of the nation. It is the way of masculine wisdom,—so full of careful forethought and admirable calculation!” She laughed again, and continued—“ Lord Melthorpe tells me you are a Seer,—an Eastern prophet arisen in these dull modern days—now will you solve me a riddle that I am unable to guess,—Myself?—and tell me if you can, who am I and what am I?”

“ Madame,” replied El-Râmi bowing profoundly, “ I cannot in one moment unravel so complex an Enigma.”

She smiled, not ill-pleased, and met his

dark, fiery, penetrating glance unreservedly, —then, drawing off her long loose glove, she held out her small beautifully-shaped white hand.

“Try me,” she said lightly, “for if there is any truth in ‘brain-waves’ or reflexes of the mind, the touch of my fingers ought to send electric meanings through you. I am generally judged as of a frivolous disposition because I am small in stature, slight in build, and have curly hair—all proofs positive, according to the majority, of latent foolishness. Colossal women, however, are always astonishingly stupid, and fat women lethargic—but a mountain of good flesh is always more attractive to man than any amount of intellectual perception. Oh, I am not posing as one of the ‘misunderstood’; not at all—I simply wish you to look well at me first and take in my ‘frivolous’ appearance thoroughly, before being misled by the messages of my hand.”

El-Râmi obeyed her in so far that he fixed his eyes upon her more searchingly than before,—a little knot of fashionable loungers had stopped to listen, and now watched her

face with equal curiosity. No rush of embarrassed colour tinged the cool fairness of her cheeks—her expression was one of quiet, half-smiling indifference—her attitude full of perfect self-possession.

“No one who looks at your eyes can call you frivolous, Madame,” said El-Râmi at last.—“And no one who observes the lines of your mouth and chin could suspect you of latent foolishness. Your physiognomy must have been judged by the merest surface-observers. As for stature, we are aware that goes for naught,—most of the heroes and heroines of history have been small and slight in build. I will now, if you permit me, take your hand.”

She laid it at once in his extended palm,—and he slowly closed his own fingers tightly over it. In a couple of minutes, his face expressed nothing but astonishment.

“Is it possible!” he muttered—“can I believe——” he broke off hurriedly, interrupted by a chorus of voices exclaiming—“Oh, what is it?—*do* tell us!” and so forth.

“May I speak, Madame?” he inquired,

bending towards Irene, with something of reverence.

She smiled assent.

“If I am surprised,” he then said slowly, “it is scarcely to be wondered at, for it is the first time I have ever chanced across the path of a woman whose life was so perfectly ideal. Madame, to you I must address the words of Hamlet—‘pure as ice, chaste as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.’ Such an existence as yours, stainless, lofty, active, hopeful, patient, and independent, is a reproach to men, and few will love you for being so superior. Those who do love you, will probably love in vain,—for the completion of your existence is not here—but Elsewhere.”

Her soft eyes dilated wonderingly,—the people immediately around her stared vaguely at El-Râmi’s dark impenetrable face.

“Then shall I be alone all my life as I am now?” she asked, as he released her hand.

“Are you sure you are alone?” he said with a grave smile.—“Are there not more companions in the poet’s so-called solitude, than in the crowded haunts of men?”

She met his earnest glance, and her own face grew radiant with a certain sweet animation that made it very lovely.

"You are right," she replied simply—"I see you understand."

Then with a graceful salutation, she prepared to move away—Roy Ainsworth pressed up close to her.

"Are you satisfied with your fortune, Madame Vassilius?" he asked rather querulously.

"Indeed I am," she answered. "Why should I not be?"

"If loneliness is a part of it," he said audaciously, "I suppose you will never marry?"

"I suppose not," she said with a ripple of laughter in her voice.—"I fear I should never be able to acknowledge a man my superior!"

She left him then, and he stood for a moment looking after her with a vexed air,—then he turned anew towards El-Râmi, who was just exchanging greetings with Sir Frederick Vaughan. This latter young man appeared highly embarrassed and nervous,

and seemed anxious to unburden himself of something which apparently was difficult to utter. He stared at Féráz, pulled the ends of his long moustache, and made scrappy remarks on nothing in particular, while El-Râmi observed him with amused intentness.

“I say, do you remember the night we saw the new Hamlet?” he blurted out at last. — “You know—I haven’t seen you since——”

“I remember most perfectly,” said El-Râmi composedly—“‘To be or not to be’ was the question then with you, as well as with Hamlet—but I suppose it is all happily decided now as ‘to be.’”

“What is decided?” stammered Sir Frederick—“I mean, how do you know everything is decided, eh?”

“When is your marriage to take place?” asked El-Râmi.

Vaughan almost jumped.

“By Jove!—you are an uncanny fellow!” he exclaimed.—“However, as it happens, you are right. I’m engaged to Miss Chester.”

“It is no surprise to me, but pray allow me to congratulate you!” and El-Râmi smiled.—“You have lost no time about it, I must say! It is only a fortnight since you first saw the lady at the theatre. Well!—confess me a true prophet!”

Sir Frederick looked uncomfortable, and was about to enter into an argument concerning the *pros* and *cons* of prophetic insight, when Lady Melthorpe suddenly emerged from the circling whirlpool of her fashionable guests and sailed towards them with a swan-like grace and languor.

“I cannot find the dear Baroness,” she said plaintively. “She is so much in demand! Do you know, my dear El-Râmi, she is really almost as wonderful as you are! Not quite—oh, not quite, but nearly! She can tell you all your past and future by the lines of your hand, in the most astonishing manner! Can you do that also?”

El-Râmi laughed.

“It is a gipsy’s trick,” he said,—“and the *bonâ-fide* gipsies who practise it in country lanes for the satisfaction of servant-girls, get arrested by the police for ‘fortune-

telling.' The gipsies of the London drawing-rooms escape scot-free."

"Oh, you are severe!" said Lady Melthorpe, shaking her finger at him with an attempt at archness—"You are really very severe! You must not be hard on our little amusements,—you know in this age, we are all so very much interested in the supernatural!"

El-Râmi grew paler, and a slight shudder shook his frame. The Supernatural! How lightly people talked of that awful Something, that like a formless Shadow waits behind the portals of the grave!—that Something that evinced itself, suggested itself, nay, almost declared itself, in spite of his own doubts, in the momentary contact of a hand with his own, as in the case of Irene Vassilius. For in that contact he had received a faint, yet decided thrill through his nerves—a peculiar sensation which he recognised as a warning of something spiritually above himself,—and this had compelled him to speak of an "Elsewhere" for her, though for himself he persisted in nourishing the doubt that an "Elsewhere" existed. Roy

Ainsworth, the artist, observing him closely, noted how stern and almost melancholy was the expression of his handsome dark face,—then glancing from him to his brother, was surprised at the marked difference between the two. The frank, open, beautiful features of Féraz seemed to invite confidence, and acting on the suggestion made to him by Madame Vassilius, he spoke abruptly.

“I wish you would sit to me,” he said.

“Sit to you? For a picture, do you mean?”
And Féraz looked delighted yet amazed.

“Yes. You have just the face I want. Are you in town?—can you spare the time?”

“I am always with my brother”—began Féraz hesitatingly.

El-Râmi heard him, and smiled rather sadly.

“Féraz is his own master,” he said gently, “and his time is quite at his own disposal.”

“Then come and let us talk it over,” said Ainsworth, taking Féraz by the arm. “I’ll pilot you through this crowd, and we’ll make for some quiet corner where we can sit down. Come along!”

Out of old habit Féraz glanced at his brother for permission, but El-Râmi's head was turned away ; he was talking to Lord Melthorpe. So, through the brilliant throng of fashionable men and women, many of whom turned to stare at him as he passed, Féraz went, half-eager, half-reluctant, his large fawn-like eyes flashing an innocent wonderment on the scene around him,—a scene different from everything to which he had been accustomed. He was uncomfortably conscious that there was something false and even deadly beneath all this glitter and show,—but his senses were dazzled for the moment, though the poet-soul of him instinctively recoiled from the noise and glare and restless movement of the crowd. It was his first entry into so-called “society” ;—and, though attracted and interested, he was also somewhat startled and abashed—for he felt instinctively that he was thrown upon his own resources,—that, for the present at any rate, his brother's will no longer influenced him, and with the sudden sense of liberty came the sudden sense of fear.



CHAPTER V.

TOWARDS midnight the expected Royal Personage came and went; fatigued but always amiable, he shed the sunshine of his stereotyped smile on Lady Melthorpe's "crush"—shook hands with his host and hostess, nodded blandly to a few stray acquaintances, and went through all the dreary, duties of social boredom heroically, though he was pining for his bed more wearily than any work-worn digger of the soil. He made his way out more quickly than he came in, and with his departure a great many of the more "snobbish" among the fashionable set disappeared also, leaving the rooms freer and cooler for their absence. People talked less loudly and assertively,—little groups began to gather in corners and

exchange friendly chit-chat,—men who had been standing all the evening found space to sit down beside their favoured fair ones, and indulge themselves in talking a little pleasant nonsense,—even the hostess herself was at last permitted to occupy an arm-chair and take a few moments' rest. Some of the guests had wandered into the music-saloon, a quaintly decorated oak-panelled apartment which opened out from the largest drawing-room. A string band had played there till Royalty had come and gone, but now "sweet harmony" no longer "wagged her silver tongue," for the musicians were at supper. The grand piano was open, and Madame Vassilius stood near it, idly touching the ivory keys now and then with her small white, sensitive-looking fingers. Close beside her, comfortably ensconced in a round deep chair, sat a very stout old lady with a curiously large hairy face and a beaming expression of eye, who appeared to have got into her pink silk gown by some cruelly unnatural means, so tightly was she laced, and so much did she seem in danger of bursting. She perspired profusely and

smiled perpetually, and frequently stroked the end of her very pronounced moustache with quite a mannish air. This was the individual for whom Lady Melthorpe had been searching,—the Baroness von Denkwald, noted for her skill in palmistry.

“Ach! it is warm!” she said in her strong German accent, giving an observant and approving glance at Irene’s white-draped form.—“You are ze one womans zat is goot to look at. A peach mit ice-cream,—dot is yourself.”

Irene smiled pensively, but made no answer.

The Baroness looked at her again, and fanned herself rapidly.

“It is sometings bad mit you?” she asked at last.—“You look sorrowful? Zat Eastern mans—he say tings disagreeable? You should pelieve *me*,—I have told you of your hand—ach! what a fortune!—splendid!—fame,—money, title,—a grand marriage——”

Irene lifted her little hand from the keyboard of the piano, and looked curiously at the lines in her pretty palm.

“Dear Baroness, there must be some mis-

take," she said slowly.—"I was a lonely child,—and some people say that as you begin, so will you end. I shall never marry—I am a lonely woman, and it will always be so."

"Always, always—not at all!" and the Baroness shook her large head obstinately. "You will marry; and Gott in Himmel save you from a husband such as mine! He is dead—oh yes—a goot ting;—he is petter off—and so am I. Moch petter!"

And she laughed, the rise and fall of her ample neck causing quite a cracking sound in the silk of her bodice.

Madame Vassilius smiled again,—and then again grew serious. She was thinking of the "Elsewhere" that El-Râmi had spoken of,—she had noticed that all he said had seemed to be uttered involuntarily,—and that he had hesitated strangely before using the word "Elsewhere." She longed to ask him one or two more questions,—and scarcely had the wish formed itself in her mind, than she saw him advancing from the drawing-room, in company with Lord Melthorpe, Sir Frederick Vaughan, and the pretty frivolous

Idina Chester, who, regardless of all that poets write concerning the unadorned simplicity of youth, had decked herself, American fashion, with diamonds enough for a dowager.

"It's too lovely!" the young lady was saying as she entered.—"I think, Mr. El-Râmi, you have made me out a most charming creature! Unemotional, harmless and innocently worldly'—that was it, wasn't it? 'Well now, I think that's splendid! I had an idea you were going to find out something horrid about me;—I'm so glad I'm harmless! You're sure I'm harmless?'"

"Quite sure!" said El-Râmi with a slight smile. "And there you possess a great superiority over most women."

And he stepped forward in obedience to Lady Melthorpe's signal, to be introduced to the 'dear' Baroness, whose shrewd little eyes dwelt upon him curiously.

"Do you believe in palmistry?" she asked him, after the ordinary greetings were exchanged.

"I'm afraid not," he answered politely—"though I am acquainted with the rules of the art as practised in the East, and I know

that many odd coincidences do occur. But,—as an example—take *my* hand—I am sure you can make nothing of it.”

He held out his open palm for her inspection—she bent over it, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. There were none of the usual innumerable little criss-cross lines upon it—nothing, in fact, but two deep dents from left to right, and one well-marked line running from the wrist to the centre.

“It is unnatural!” cried the Baroness in amazement.—“It is a malformation! There is no hand like it!”

“I believe not,” answered El-Râmi composedly.—“As I told you, you can learn nothing from it—and yet my life has not been without its adventures. This hand of mine is my excuse for not accepting palmistry as an absolutely proved science.”

“Must everything be ‘proved’ for you?” asked Irene Vassilius suddenly.

“Assuredly, Madame!”

“Then have you ‘proved’ the Elsewhere of which you spoke to me?”

El-Râmi flushed a little,—then paled again.

“Madame, the message of your inner spirit, as conveyed first through the electric medium of the brain, and then through the magnetism of your touch, told me of an ‘Elsewhere.’ I may not personally or positively know of any ‘elsewhere,’ than this present state of being,—but your interior Self expects an ‘Elsewhere,’—apparently knows of it better than I do, and conveys that impression and knowledge to me, apart from any consideration as to whether I may be fitted to understand or receive it.”

These words were heard with evident astonishment by the little group of people who stood by, listening.

“Dear me! How *ve—ry* curious!” murmured Lady Melthorpe.—“And we have always looked upon dear Madame Vassilius as quite a free-thinker,”—here she smiled apologetically, as Irene lifted her serious eyes and looked at her steadily—“I mean, as regards the next world and all those interesting subjects. In some of her books, for instance, she is terribly severe on the clergy.”

“Not more so than many of them deserve,

I am sure," said El-Râmi with sudden heat and asperity.—"It was not Christ's intention, I believe, that the preachers of His Gospel should drink and hunt, and make love to their neighbours' wives *ad libitum*, which is what a great many of them do. The lives of the clergy nowadays offer very few worthy examples to the laity."

Lady Melthorpe coughed delicately and warningly. She did not like plain speaking,—she had a "pet clergyman" of her own,—moreover, she had been bred up in the provinces among "county" folk, some of whom still believe that at one period of the world's history "God" was always wanting the blood of bulls and goats to smell "as a sweet savour in His nostrils." She herself preferred to believe in the possibility of the Deity's having "nostrils," rather than take the trouble to consider the effect of His majestic Thought as evinced in the supremely perfect order of the Planets and Solar Systems.

El-Râmi, however, went on regardlessly.

"Free-thinkers," he said, "are for the most part truth-seekers. If everybody gave way

to the foolish credulity attained to by the believers in the 'Mahatmas' for instance, what an idiotic condition the world would be in! We want free-thinkers,—as many as we can get,—to help us to distinguish between the False and the True. We want to separate the Actual from the Seeming in our lives,—and there is so much Seeming and so little Actual that the process is difficult."

"Why, dat is nonsense!" said the Baroness von Denkenwald.—"Mit a Fact, zere is no mistake—you prove him. See!" and she took up a silver penholder from the table near her.—"Here is a pen,—mit ink it is used to write—zere is what you call ze Actual."

El-Râmi smiled.

"Believe me, my dear Madame, it is only a pen so long as you elect to view it in that light. Allow me!"—and he took it from her hand, fixing his eyes upon her the while. "Will you place the tips of your fingers—the fingers of the left hand—yes—so! on my wrist? Thank you!"—this, as she obeyed with a rather vague smile on her big fat

face.—“Now you will let me have the satisfaction of offering you this spray of lilies—the first of the season,” and he gravely extended the silver penholder.—“Is not the odour delicious!”

“Ach! it is heavenly!” and the Baroness smelt at the penholder with an inimitable expression of delight. Everybody began to laugh—El-Râmi silenced them by a look.

“Madame, you are under some delusion,” he said quietly.—“You have no lilies in your hand, only a penholder.”

She laughed.

“You are very funny!” she said—“but I shall not be deceived. I shall wear my lilies.”

And she endeavoured to fasten the penholder in the front of her bodice,—when suddenly El-Râmi drew his hand away from hers. A startled expression passed over her face, but in a minute or two she recovered her equanimity and twirled the penholder placidly between her fingers.

“Zere is what you call ze Actual,” she said, taking up the conversation where it had previously been interrupted.—“A pen-

holder is always a penholder—you can make nothing more of it.”

But here she was surrounded by the excited onlookers—a flood of explanations poured upon her, as to how she had taken that same penholder for a spray of lilies, and so forth, till the old lady grew quite hot and angry.

“I shall not believe you!” she said indignantly.—“It is impossible. You haf a joke—but I do not see it. Irene”—and she looked appealingly to Madame Vassilius, who had witnessed the whole scene—“it is not true, is it?”

“Yes, dear Baroness, it is true,” said Irene soothingly.—“But it is a nothing after all. Your eyes were deceived for the moment—and Mr. El-Râmi has shown us very cleverly, by scientific exposition, how the human sight can be deluded—he conveyed an impression of lilies to your brain, and you saw lilies accordingly. I quite understand,—it is only through the brain that we receive any sense of sight. The thing is easy of comprehension, though it seems wonderful.”

"It is devilry!" said the Baroness solemnly, getting up and shaking out her voluminous pink train with a wrathful gesture.

"No, Madame," said El-Râmi earnestly, with a glance at her which somehow had the effect of quieting her ruffled feelings. "It is merely science. Science was looked upon as 'devilry' in ancient times,—but we in our generation are more liberal-minded."

"But what shall it lead to, all zis science?" demanded the Baroness, still with some irritation.—"I see not any use in it. If one deceive ze eye so quickly, it is only to make peoples angry to find demselves such fools!"

"Ah, my dear lady, if we could all know to what extent exactly we could be fooled,—not only as regards our sight, but our other senses and passions, we should be wiser and more capable of self-government than we are. Every step that helps us to the attainment of such knowledge is worth the taking."

"And you have taken so many of those steps," said Irene Vassilius, "that I suppose it would be difficult to deceive *you*?"

"I am only human, Madame," returned El-Râmi, with a faint touch of bitterness in

his tone, "and therefore I am capable of being led astray by my own emotions as others are."

"Are we not getting too analytical?" asked Lord Melthorpe cheerily. "Here is Miss Chester wanting to know where your brother Féraz is. She only caught a glimpse of him in the distance,—and she would like to make his closer acquaintance."

"He went with Mr. Ainsworth," began El-Râmi.

"Yes—I saw them together in the conservatory," said Lady Melthorpe. "They were deep in conversation—but it is time they gave us a little of their company—I'll go and fetch them here."

She went, but almost immediately returned, followed by the two individuals in question. Féraz looked a little flushed and excited,—Roy Ainsworth calm and nonchalant as usual.

"I've asked your brother to come and sit to me to-morrow," the latter said, addressing himself at once to El-Râmi. "He is quite willing to oblige me,—and I presume you have no objection?"

"Not the least in the world!" responded El-Râmi with apparent readiness, though the keen observer might have detected a slight ring of satirical coldness in his tone.

"He is a curious fellow," continued Roy, looking at Férâz where he stood, going through the formality of an introduction to Miss Chester, whose bold bright eyes rested upon him in frank and undisguised admiration. "He seems to know nothing of life."

"What do you call 'life'?" demanded El-Râmi, with harsh abruptness.

"Why, life as we men live it, of course," answered Roy, complacently.

"'Life, as we men live it!'" echoed El-Râmi. "By Heaven, there is nothing viler under the sun than life lived so! The very beasts have a more decent and self-respecting mode of behaviour,—and the everyday existence of an ordinary 'man about town' is low and contemptible as compared to that of an honest-hearted Dog!"

Ainsworth lifted his languid eyes with a stare of amazement ;—Irene Vassilius smiled.

"I agree with you!" she said softly.

"Oh, of course!" murmured Roy sar-

castically—"Madame Vassilius agrees with everything that points to, or suggests the utter worthlessness of Man!"

Her eyes flashed.

"Believe me," she said, with some passion, "I would give worlds to be able to honour and revere men,—and there are some whom I sincerely respect and admire,—but I frankly admit that the majority of them awaken nothing in me but the sentiment of contempt. I regret it, but I cannot help it."

"You want men to be gods," said Ainsworth, regarding her with an indulgent smile; "and when they can't succeed, poor wretches, you are hard on them. You are a born goddess, and to you it comes quite naturally to occupy a throne on Mount Olympus, and gaze with placid indifference on all below,—but to others, the process is difficult. For example, I am a groveller. I grovel round the base of the mountain and rather like it. A valley is warmer than a summit, always."

A faint sea-shell pink flush crept over Irene's cheeks, but she made no reply. She was watching Féraz, round whom a bevy of

pretty women were congregated, like nineteenth-century nymphs round a new Eastern Apollo. He looked a little embarrassed, yet his very diffidence had an indefinable grace and attraction about it which was quite novel and charming to the jaded fashionable fair ones who for the moment made him their chief object of attention. They were pressing him to give them some music, and he hesitated, not out of any shyness to perform, but simply from a sense of wonder as to how such a spiritual, impersonal and divine thing as Music could be made to assert itself in the midst of so much evident frivolity. He looked appealingly at his brother,—but El-Râmi regarded him not. He understood this mute avoidance of his eyes,—he was thrown upon himself to do exactly as he chose,—and his sense of pride stimulated him to action. Breaking from the ring of his fair admirers, he advanced towards the piano.

“I will play a simple prelude,” he said, “and if you like it, you shall hear more.”

There was an immediate silence. Irene Vassilius moved a little apart and sat on a

low divan, her hands clasped idly in her lap ;—near her stood Lord Melthorpe, Roy Ainsworth, and El-Râmi ;—Sir Frederick Vaughan and his fiancée, Idina Chester, occupied what is known as a “flirtation chair” together ; several guests flocked in from the drawing-rooms, so that the salon was comparatively well-filled. Féraz poised his delicate and supple hands on the keyboard,—and then—why, what then ? Nothing !—only music !—music divinely pure and sweet as a lark’s song,—music that spoke of things as yet undeclared in mortal language,—of the mystery of an angel’s tears—of the joy of a rose in bloom,—of the mid-summer dreams of a lily enfolded within its green leaf-pavilion,—of the love-messages carried by silver beams from bridegroom-stars to bride-satellites,—of a hundred delicate and wordless marvels the music talked eloquently in rounded and mystic tone. And gradually, but invincibly, upon all those who listened, there fell the dreamy nameless spell of perfect harmony,—they did not understand, they could not grasp the far-off heavenly meanings which the sounds con-

veyed, but they knew and felt such music was not earthly. The quest of gold, or thirst of fame, had nothing to do with such composition—it was above and beyond all that. When the delicious melody ceased, it seemed to leave an emptiness in the air,—an aching regret in the minds of the audience; it had fallen like dew on arid soil, and there were tears in many eyes, and passionate emotions stirring many hearts, as Féraz pressed his finger-tips with a velvet-like softness on the closing chord. Then came a burst of excited applause which rather startled him from his dreams. He looked round with a faint smile of wonderment, and this time chanced to meet his brother's gaze earnestly fixed upon him. Then an idea seemed to occur to him, and playing a few soft notes by way of introduction, he said aloud, almost as though he were talking to himself—

“There are in the world's history a few old legends and stories, which, whether they are related in prose or rhyme, seem to set themselves involuntarily to music. I will tell you one now, if you care to hear it,—the Story of the Priest Philemon.”

There was a murmur of delight and expectation, followed by profound silence as before.

Féraz lifted his eyes,—bright stag-like eyes, now flashing with warmth and inspiration,—and pressing the piano pedals, he played a few slow solemn chords like the opening bars of a church chant ; then, in a soft, rich, perfectly modulated voice, he began.





CHAPTER VI.

“LONG, long ago, in a far-away province of the Eastern world, there was once a priest named Philemon. Early and late he toiled to acquire wisdom—early and late he prayed and meditated on things divine and unattainable. To the Great Unknown his aspirations turned; with all the ardour of his soul he sought to penetrate behind the mystic veil of the Supreme Centre of creation; and the joys and sorrows, hopes and labours of mortal existence seemed to him but worthless and contemptible trifles when compared with the eternal marvels of the incomprehensible Hereafter, on which, in solitude, he loved to dream and ponder.”

Here Féraz paused,—and touching the keys of the piano with a caressing lightness,

played a soft minor melody, which like a silver thread of sound, accompanied his next words.

“And so, by gradual and almost imperceptible degrees, the wise priest Philemon forgot the world ;—forgot men, and women, and little children,—forgot the blueness of the skies, the verdure of the fields,—forgot the grace of daisies growing in the grass,—forgot the music of sweet birds singing in the boughs,—forgot indeed everything, except—himself!—and his prayers, and his wisdom, and his burning desire to approach more closely every hour to that wondrous goal of the Divine from whence all life doth come, and to which all life must, in due time, return.”

Here the musical accompaniment changed to a plaintive tenderness.

“But by-and-by, news of the wise priest Philemon began to spread in the town near where he had his habitation,—and people spoke of his fastings and his watchings with awe and wonder, with hope and fear,—until at last there came a day when a great crowd of the sick and sorrowful and oppressed, surrounded his abode, and called upon him to pray for them, and give them comfort.

“ ‘Bestow upon *us* some of the Divine Consolation!’ they cried, kneeling in the dust and weeping as they spoke—‘for we are weary and worn with labour,—we suffer with harsh wounds of the heart and spirit,—many of us have lost all that makes life dear. Pity us, O thou wise servant of the Supreme—and tell us out of thy stores of heavenly wisdom whether we shall ever regain the loves that we have lost!’

“ Then the priest Philemon rose up in haste and wrath, and going out before them said—

“ ‘Depart from me, ye accursed crew of wicked worldlings! Why have ye sought me out, and what have I to do with your petty miseries? Lo, ye have brought the evils of which ye complain upon yourselves, and justice demands that ye should suffer. Ask not from me one word of pity—seek not from me any sympathy for sin. I have severed myself from ye all, to escape pollution,—my life belongs to God, not to Humanity!’

“ And the people hearing him were wroth, and went their way homewards, sore at heart,

and all uncomforted. And Philemon the priest, fearing lest they might seek him out again, departed from that place for ever, and made for himself a hut in the deep thickness of the forest where never a human foot was found to wander save his own. Here in the silence and deep solitude he resolved to work and pray, keeping his heart and spirit sanctified from every soiling touch of nature that could separate his thoughts from the Divine."

Again the music changed, this time to a dulcet rippling passage of notes like the flowing of a mountain stream,—and Féraz continued,—

"One morning, as, lost in a rapture of holy meditation, he prayed his daily prayer, a small bird perched upon his window-sill, and began to sing. Not a loud song, but a sweet song—full of the utmost tenderness and playful warbling,—a song born out of the leaves and grasses and gentle winds of heaven,—as delicate a tune as ever small bird sang. The priest Philemon listened, and his mind wandered. The bird's singing was sweet; oh, so sweet, that it recalled to him many things he had imagined long ago forgotten,—almost

he heard his mother's voice again,—and the blithe and gracious days of his early youth suggested themselves to his memory like the lovely fragments of a poem once familiar, but now scarce remembered. Presently the bird flew away, and the priest Philemon awoke as from a dream,—his prayer had been interrupted; his thoughts had been drawn down to earth from heaven, all through the twittering of a foolish feathered thing not worth a farthing! Angry with himself, he spent the day in penitence,—and on the following morning betook himself to his devotions with more than his usual ardour. Stretched on his prayer-mat he lay entranced; when suddenly a low sweet trill of sound broke gently through the silence,—the innocent twittering voice of the little bird once more aroused him,—first to a sense of wonder, then of wrath. Starting up impatiently he looked about him, and saw the bird quite close, within his reach,—it had flown inside his hut, and now hopped lightly over the floor towards him, its bright eyes full of fearless confidence, its pretty wings still quivering with the fervour of its song. Then the priest

Philemon seized a heavy oaken staff, and slew it where it stood with one remorseless blow, and flung the little heap of ruffled feathers out into the woodland, saying fiercely—

“ ‘Thou, at least, shalt never more disturb my prayers!’

“And even as he thus spoke, a great light shone forth suddenly, more dazzling than the brightness of the day, and lo! an Angel stood within the hut, just where the dead bird’s blood had stained the floor. And the priest Philemon fell upon his face and trembled greatly, for the Vision was more glorious than the grandest of his dreams. And a Voice called aloud, saying—

“ ‘Philemon, why hast thou slain My messenger?’

“And Philemon looked up in fear and wonderment, answering—

“ ‘Dread Lord, what messenger? I have slain nothing but a bird.’

“And the voice spake again, saying—

“ ‘O thou remorseless priest!—knowest thou not that every bird in the forests is Mine,—every leaf on the trees is Mine,—every blade of grass and every flower is Mine, and is a

part of Me! The song of that slain bird was sweeter than thy many prayers ;—and when thou didst listen to its voice thou wert nearer Heaven than thou hast ever been! Thou hast rebelled against My law ;—in rejecting Love, thou hast rejected Me,—and when thou didst turn the poor and needy from thy doors, refusing them all comfort, even so did I turn My Face from thee and refuse thy petitions. Wherefore hear now thy punishment. For the space of a thousand years thou shalt live within this forest ;—no human eye shall ever find thee,—no human foot shall ever track thee—no human voice shall ever sound upon thy ears. No companions shalt thou have but birds and beasts and flowers,—from these shalt thou learn wisdom, and through thy love of these alone shalt thou make thy peace with Heaven! Pray no more,—fast no more,—for such things count but little in the eternal reckonings,—but *love* !—and learn to make thyself beloved, even by the least and lowest, and by this shalt thou penetrate at last the mystery of the Divine !

“ The voice ceased—the glory vanished,

and when the priest Philemon raised his eyes, he was alone."

Here, altering by a few delicate modulations the dreamy character of the music he had been improvising, Féraz reverted again to the quaint, simple and solemn chords with which he had opened the recitation.

"Humbled in spirit, stricken at heart, conscious of the justice of his doom, yet working as one not without hope, Philemon began his heaven-appointed task. And to this day travellers' legends tell of a vast impenetrable solitude, a forest of giant trees, where never a human step has trod, but where, it is said, strange colonies of birds and beasts do congregate,—where rare and marvellous plants and flowers flourish in their fairest hues,—where golden bees and dazzling butterflies gather by thousands,—where all the songsters of the air make the woods musical,—where birds of passage, outward or homeward bound, rest on their way, sure of a pleasant haven,—and where all the beautiful, wild, and timid inhabitants of field, forest and mountain, are at peace together, mutually content in an Eden of

their own. There is a guardian of the place,—so say the country people,—a Spirit, thin and white, and silver-haired, who understands the language of the birds, and knows the secrets of the flowers, and in whom all the creatures of the woods confide—a mystic being whose strange life has lasted nearly a thousand years. Generations have passed—cities and empires have crumbled to decay,—and none remember him who was once called Philemon,—the ‘wise’ priest, grown wise indeed at last, with the only Wisdom God ever sanctifies—the Wisdom of Love.”

With a soft impressive chord the music ceased,—the story was ended,—and Féraz rose from the piano to be surrounded at once by a crowd of admirers, all vying with each other in flattering expressions of applause and delight; but though he received these compliments with unaffected and courteous grace enough, his eyes perpetually wandered to his brother’s face,—that dark, absorbed beloved face,—yes, beloved!—for, rebel as he might against El-Râmi’s inflexible will and despotic power, Féraz knew he could never wrench from out his heart the deep

affection and reverence for him which were the natural result of years of tender and sympathetic intercourse. If his brother had commanded him, he had also loved him,—there could be no doubt of that. Was he displeased or unhappy now, that he looked so sad and absorbed in gloomy and perplexed thought? A strange pained emotion stirred Féraz's sensitive soul,—some intangible vague sense of separation seemed to have arisen between himself and El-Râmi, and he grew impatient with this brilliant assembly of well-dressed chattering folk, whose presence prevented him from giving vent to the full expression of his feelings. Lady Melthorpe talked to him in dulcet languid tones, fanning herself the while, and telling him sweetly what a "wonderful touch" he had,—what an "exquisite speaking voice"—and so forth, all which elegantly turned phrases he heard as in a dream. As soon as he could escape from her and those of her friends who were immediately round him, he made his way to El-Râmi and touched his arm.

"Let me stay beside you!" he said in a low tone in which there was a slight accent of entreaty.

El-Râmi turned, and looked at him kindly.

"Dear boy, you had better make new friends while you can, lest the old be taken from you."

"Friends!" echoed Férâz—"Friends—*here?*" He gave a gesture more eloquent than speech, of doubt and disdain,—then continued, "Might we not go now? Is it not time to return home and sleep?"

El-Râmi smiled.

"Nay, are we not seeing life? Here we are among pretty women, well-bred men—the rooms are elegant,—and the conversation is as delightfully vague and nearly as noisy as the chattering of monkeys—yet with all these advantages, you talk of sleep!"

Férâz laughed a little.

"Yes, I am tired," he said. "It does not seem to me real, all this—there is something shadowy and unsubstantial about it. I think sleep is better."

At that moment Irene Vassilius came up to them.

"I am just going," she said, letting her soft serious eyes dwell on Férâz with interest, "but I feel I must thank you for your story

of the 'Priest Philemon.' Is it your own idea?—or does such a legend exist?"

"Nothing is really new," replied Féraz—"but such as it is, it is my own invention.

"Then you are a poet and musician at one and the same time," said Irene. "It seems a natural combination of gifts, yet the two do not always go together. I hope"—she now addressed herself to El-Râmi—"I hope very much you will come and see me, though I'm afraid I'm not a very popular person. My friends are few, so I cannot promise you much entertainment. Indeed, as a rule, people do not like me."

"I like you!" said Féraz, quickly and impulsively.

She smiled.

"Yes? That is good of you. And I believe you, for you are too unworldly to deal in flatteries. But, I assure you, that, generally speaking, literary women are never social favourites."

"Not even when they are lovely like you?" questioned Féraz, with simple frankness.

She coloured at the evident sincerity of his

admiration and the boyish openness with which it was thus expressed. Then she laughed a little.

“ Loveliness is not acknowledged as at all existent in literary females,” she replied lightly, yet with a touch of scorn,—“ even if they do possess any personal charm, it only serves as a peg for the malicious to hang a slander on. And of the two sexes, men are most cruel to a woman who dares to think for herself.”

“ Are you sure of that, Madame ?” asked El-Râmi gently. “ May not this be an error of your judgment ?”

“ I would that it were !” she said with intense expression — “ Heaven knows how sincerely I should rejoice to be proved wrong ! But I am not wrong. Men always judge women as their inferiors, not only physically (which they are) but mentally (which they are not), and always deny them an independent soul and independent emotions,—the majority of men, indeed, treat them pretty much as a sort of superior cattle ;—but, nevertheless, there is a something in what the French call ‘ *L’Eternel Feminin*.’

Women are distinctly the greatest sufferers in all suffering creation,—and I have often thought that for so much pain and so much misjudgment, endured often with such heroic silence and uncomplaining fortitude, the compensation will be sweeter and more glorious than we, half drowned in our own tears, can as yet hope for, or imagine!"

She paused—her eyes were dark with thought and full of a dreamy sorrow,—then, smiling gently, she held out her hand.

"I talk too much, you will say—women always do! Come and see me if you feel disposed—not otherwise; I will send you my card through Lady Melthorpe—meantime, good-night!"

El-Râmi took her hand, and as he pressed it in his own, felt again that curious thrill which had before communicated itself to his nerves through the same contact.

"Surely you must be a visionary, Madame!" he said abruptly and with a vague sense of surprise—"and you see things not at all of this world!"

Her faint roseate colour deepened, giving singular beauty to her face.

“What a tell-tale hand mine is!” she replied, withdrawing it slowly from his clasp. “Yes—you are right,—if I could not see things higher than this world, I could not endure my existence for an hour. It is because I feel the Future so close about me that I have courage for, and indifference to, the Present.”

With that, she left them, and both El-Râmi and Féraz followed her graceful movements with interested eyes, as she glided through the rooms in her snowy trailing robes, with the frosty flash of diamonds in her hair, till she had altogether disappeared; then the languid voice of Lady Melthorpe addressed them.

“Isn’t she an odd creature, that Irene Vassilius? So quaint and peculiar in her ideas! People detest her, you know—she is so dreadfully clever!”

“There could not be a better reason for hatred!” said El-Râmi.

“You see, she says such unpleasant things,” went on Lady Melthorpe, complacently fanning herself,—“she has such decided opinions, and will not accommodate herself to people’s

ways. I must confess I always find her *dé-trop*, myself."

"She was your guest to-night," said Féraz suddenly, and with such a sternness in his accent as caused her ladyship to look at him in blank surprise.

"Certainly! One must always ask a celebrity."

"If one must always ask, then one is bound always to respect," said Féraz coldly. "In our *code d'honneur*, we never speak ill of those who have partaken of our hospitality."

So saying, he turned on his heel and walked away with so much haughtiness of demeanour that Lady Melthorpe stood as though rooted to the spot, staring speechlessly after him. Then rousing herself, she looked at El-Râmi and shrugged her shoulders.

"Really," she began,—“really, Mr. El-Râmi, your brother's manner is very strange——”

"It is," returned El-Râmi quickly—"I admit it. His behaviour is altogether unpolished—and he is quite unaccustomed to society. I told Lord Melthorpe so,—and I

was against his being invited here. He says exactly what he thinks, without fear or favour, and in this regard is really a mere barbarian ! Allow me to apologize for him !”

Lady Melthorpe bowed stiffly,—she saw, or fancied she saw, a faint ironical smile playing on El-Râmi’s lips beneath his dark moustache. She was much annoyed,—the idea of a “boy” like Férâz, presuming to talk to her, a leader of London fashion, about a *code d’honneur* ! The thing was monstrous,—absurd ! And as for Irene Vassilius, why should not she be talked about?—she was a public person ; a writer of books which Mrs. Grundy in her church-going moods had voted as “dangerous.” Truly Lady Melthorpe considered she had just cause to be ruffled, and she began to regret having invited these “Eastern men,” as she termed them, to her house at all. El-Râmi perceived her irritation, but he made no further remark ; and as soon as he could conveniently do so, he took his formal leave of her. Quickly threading his way through the now rapidly thinning throng, he sought out Férâz, whom he found in the hall talking to Roy Ainsworth and

making final arrangements for the sitting he was to give the artist next day.

"I should like to make a study of your head too," said Roy, with a keen glance at El-Râmi as he approached—"but I suppose you have no time."

"No time—and still less inclination!" responded El-Râmi laughingly; "for I have sworn that no 'counterfeit presentment' of my bodily form shall ever exist. It would always be a false picture,—it would never be Me, because it would only represent the Perishable, whilst I am the Imperishable."

"Singular man!" said Roy Ainsworth. "What do you mean?"

"What should I mean," replied El-Râmi quickly, "save what all your religions and churches mean, if in truth they have any meaning. Is there not something else besides this fleshly covering? If you can paint the imagined Soul of a man looking out of his eyes, you are a great artist,—but if you could paint the Soul itself, stripped of its mortal disguise, radiant, ethereal, brilliant as lightning, beautiful as dawn, you would be greater still. And the soul is the Me,—

these features of mine, this Appearance, is mere covering,—we want a Portrait, not a Costume.”

“Your argument applies to your brother as well as yourself,” said Ainsworth, wondering at the eloquent wildness of this strange El-Râmi’s language, and fascinated by it in spite of himself.

“Just so! Only the Earth-garment of Féraz is charming and becoming—mine is not. It is a case of ‘my hair is white but not with years’—the ‘Prisoner of Chillon’ sort of thing. Good-night!”

“Good-night!” and the artist shook hands warmly with both brothers, saying to Féraz as he parted from him—“I may expect you then to-morrow? You will not fail?”

“You may rely upon me!” and Féraz nodded lightly in adieu, and followed El-Râmi out of the house into the street, where they began to walk homeward together at a rapid rate. As they went, by some mutual involuntary instinct they lifted their eyes to the dense blue heavens, where multitudes of stars were brilliantly visible. Féraz drew a long deep breath.

"There," he said, "is the Infinite and Real,—what we have seen of life to-night is finite and unreal."

El-Râmi made no reply.

"Do you not think so?" persisted Férâz earnestly.

"I cannot say definitely what is Real and what is Unreal," said El-Râmi slowly—"both are so near akin. Férâz, are you aware you offended Lady Melthorpe to-night?"

"Why should she be offended? I only said just what I thought."

"Good heavens, my dear boy, if you always go about saying just what you think, you will find the world too hot to hold you. To say the least of it, you will never be fit for society."

"I don't want to be fit for it," said Férâz disdainfully, "if Lady Melthorpe's 'at home' is a picture of it. I want to forget it,—the most of it, I mean. I shall remember Madame Vassilius because she is sympathetic and interesting. But for the rest!—my dearest brother, I am far happier with you."

El-Râmi took his arm gently.

"Yet you leave me to-morrow to gratify an artist's whim!" he said. "Have you thought of that?"

"Oh, but that is nothing—only an hour or two's sitting. He was so very anxious that I could not refuse. Does it displease you?"

"My dear Féraz, I am displeased at nothing. You complained of my authority over you once—and I have determined you shall not complain again. Consider yourself free."

"I do not want my liberty," said Féraz, almost petulantly.

"Try it!" responded El-Râmi with a smile and half a sigh. "Liberty is sweet,—but, like other things, it brings its own responsibilities."

They walked on till they had almost reached their own door.

"Your story of the priest Philemon was very quaint and pretty," said El-Râmi then abruptly. "You meant it as a sort of allegory for me, did you not?"

Féraz looked wistfully at him, but hesitated to reply.

"It does not quite fit me," went on El-Râmi gently. "I am not impervious to love—for I love *you*. Perhaps the angels will take that fact into consideration, when they are settling my thousand or million years' punishment."

There was a touch of quiet pathos in his voice which moved Féraz greatly, and he could not trust himself to speak. When they entered their own abode, El-Râmi said the usual "Good-night" in his usual kindly manner,—but Féraz reverently stooped and kissed the hand extended to him,—the potent hand that had enriched his life with poesy and dowered it with dreams.





CHAPTER VII.

ALL the next day El-Râmi was alone. Férâz went out early to fulfil the appointment made with Roy Ainsworth ; no visitors called,—and not even old Zaroba came near the study, where, shut up with his books and papers, her master worked assiduously hour after hour, writing as rapidly as hand and pen would allow, and satisfying his appetite solely with a few biscuits dipped in wine. Just as the shadows of evening were beginning to fall, his long solitude was disturbed by the sharp knock of a telegraph-messenger, who handed him a missive which ran briefly thus—

“Your brother stays to dine with me.—
AINSWORTH.”

El-Râmi crushed the paper in his hand, then, flinging it aside, stood for a moment, lost in meditation, with a sorrowful expression in his dark eyes.

“Ay me! the emptiness of the world!” he murmured at last—“I shall be left alone, I suppose, as my betters are left, according to the rule of this curiously designed and singularly unsatisfactory system of human life. What do the young care for the solitude of their elders who have tended and loved them? New thoughts, new scenes, new aspirations beckon them, and off they go like birds on the wing,—never to return to the old nest or the old ways. I despise the majority of women myself,—and yet I pity from my soul all those who are mothers,—the miserable dignity and pathos of maternity are, in my opinion, grotesquely painful. To think of the anguish the poor delicate wretches endure in bringing children at all into the world,—then, the tenderness and watchful devotion expended on their early years,—and then—why then, these same children grow up for the most part into indifferent (when not entirely callous) men and women, who

make their own lives as it seems best to themselves, and almost forget to whom they owe their very existence. It is hard—bitterly hard. There ought to be some reason for such a wild waste of love and affliction. At present, however, I can see none.”

He sighed deeply, and stared moodily into the deepening shadows.

“Loneliness is horrible!” he said aloud, as though addressing some invisible auditor. “It is the chief terror of death,—for one must always die alone. No matter how many friends and relatives stand weeping round the bed, one is absolutely *alone* at the hour of death, for the stunned soul wanders blindly

‘out of sight,
Far off in a place where it is not heard.’

That solitary pause and shudder on the brink of the Unseen is fearful,—it unnerves us all to think of it. If Love could help us,—but even Love grows faint and feeble then.”

As he mused thus, a strange vague longing came over him,—an impulse arising out of he knew not what suggestion ; and acting on

his thought, he went suddenly and swiftly upstairs, and straight into the chamber of Lilith. Zaroba was there, and rose from her accustomed corner silently, and moved with a somewhat feeble step into the ante-room while El-Râmi bent over the sleeping girl. Lovelier than ever she seemed that evening,—and as he stooped above her, she stretched out her fair white arms and smiled. His heart beat quickly,—he had, for the moment, ceased to analyze his own feelings,—and he permitted himself to gaze upon her beauty and absorb it, without, as usual, taking any thought of the scientific aspect of her condition.

“Tresses twisted by fairy fingers,
In which the light of the morning lingers!”

he murmured, as he touched a rippling strand of the lovely hair that lay spread like a fleece of gold floss silk on the pillow near him,—
“Poor Lilith!—Sweet Lilith!”

As if responsive to his words, she turned slightly towards him, and felt the air blindly with one wandering white hand. Gently he caught it and imprisoned it within his own,—

then on a strange impulse, kissed it. To his utter amazement she answered that touch as though it had been a call.

“I am here, . . . my Belovëd!”

He started, and an icy thrill ran through his veins;—that word “Belovëd” was a sort of electric shock to his system, and sent a dizzying rush of blood to his brain. What did she mean,—what could she mean? The last time she had addressed him she had declared that he was not even her friend—now she called him her “beloved”—as much to his amazement as his fear. Presently, however, he considered that here perhaps was some new development of his experiment;—the soul of Lilith might possibly be in closer communion with him than he had yet imagined. But in spite of his attempt to reason away his emotions, he was nervous, and stood by the couch silently, afraid to speak, and equally afraid to move. Lilith was silent too. A long pause ensued, in which the usually subdued tickings of the clock seemed to become painfully audible. El-Râmi’s breath came and went quickly,—he was singularly excited,—some subtle

warmth from the little hand he held, permeated his veins, and a sense of such utter powerlessness possessed him as he had never experienced before. What ailed him? He could not tell. Where was the iron force of his despotic will? He seemed unable to exert it,—unable even to *think* coherently while Lilith's hand thus rested in his. Had she grown stronger than himself? A tingling tremor ran through him, as the strange words of the monk's written warning suddenly recurred to his memory.

“Beware the end! With Lilith's love comes Lilith's freedom.”

But Lilith smiled with placid sweetness, and still left her hand confidingly in his; he held that hand, so warm and soft and white, and was loth to let it go,—he studied the rapt expression of the beautiful face, the lovely curve of the sweet shut lips, the delicately veined lids of the closed eyes,—and was dimly conscious of a sense of vague happiness curiously intermingled with terror. By-and-by he began to collect his ideas which had been so suddenly scattered by that one word “Belovëd,”—and he resolved

to break the mystic silence that oppressed and daunted him.

“Dreaming or waking, is she?” he queried aloud, a little tremulously, and as though he were talking to himself. “She must be dreaming!”

“Dreaming of joy!” said Lilith softly, and with quick responsiveness—“only that Joy is no dream! I hear your voice,—I am conscious of your touch,—almost I see you! The cloud hangs there between us still—but God is good,—He will remove that cloud.”

El-Râmi listened, perplexed and wondering.

“Lilith,” he said in a voice that strove in vain to assume its wonted firmness and authority—“What say you of clouds,—you who are in the full radiance of a light that is quenchless? Have you not told me of a glory that out-dazzles the sun, in which you move and have your being,—then what do you know of Shadow?”

“Yours is the Shadow,” replied Lilith—“not mine! I would that I could lift it from your eyes, that you might see the Wonder

and the Beauty. Oh, cruel Shadow, that lies between my love and me !”

“ Lilith ! Lilith !” exclaimed El-Râmi in strange agitation—“ Why will you talk of love ?”

“ Do you not think of love ?” said Lilith—“ and must I not respond to your innermost thought ?”

“ Not always do you so respond, Lilith !” said El-Râmi quickly, recovering himself a little, and glad of an opportunity to bring back his mind to a more scientific level. “ Often you speak of things I know not,—things that perhaps I shall never know——”

“ Nay, you *must* know,” said Lilith, with soft persistence. “ Every unit of life in every planet is bound to know its Cause and Final Intention. All is clear to me, and will be so to you, hereafter. You ask me of these things—I tell you,—but you do not believe me ;—you will never believe me till—the end.”

“ Beware the end !” The words echoed themselves so distinctly in El-Râmi’s mind that he could almost have fancied they were

spoken aloud in the room. "What end?" he asked eagerly.

But to this Lilith answered nothing.

He looked at the small sensitive hand he held, and stroking it gently, was about to lay it back on her bosom, when all at once she pressed her fingers closely over his palm, and sat upright, her delicate face expressive of the most intense emotion, notwithstanding her closed eyes.

"Write!" she said in a clear penetrating voice that sent silvery echoes through the room—"write these truths to the world you live in. Tell the people they all work for Evil, and therefore Evil shall be upon them. What they sow, even that shall they reap,—with the measure they have used, it shall be measured to them again. O wild world!—sad world!—world wherein the pride of wealth, the joy of sin, the cruelty of avarice, the curse of selfishness, outweigh all pity, all sympathy, all love! For this God's law of Compensation makes but one return—Destruction. Wars shall prevail; plague and famine shall ravage the nations;—young children shall murder the parents who bore

them ; theft and rapine shall devastate the land. For your world is striving to live without God,—and a world without God is a disease that must die. Like a burnt-out star this Earth shall fall from its sphere and vanish utterly—and its sister-planets shall know it no more. For when it is born again, it will be new.”

The words came from her lips with a sort of fervid eloquence which seemed to exhaust her, for she grew paler and paler, and her head began to sink backward on the pillow. El-Râmi gently put his arm round her to support her, and as he did so, a kind of supernatural light irradiated her features.

“ Believe me, O my Belovéd, believe the words of Lilith !” she murmured. “ There is but one Law leading to all Wisdom. Evil generates Evil, and contains within itself its own retribution. Good generates good, and holds within itself the germ of eternal reproduction. Love begets Love, and from Love is born Immortality !”

Her voice grew fainter,—she sank entirely back on her pillow ; yet once again her lips moved and the word “ Immortality !” floated

whisperingly forth like a sigh. El-Râmi drew his arm away from her, and at the same instant disengaged his hand from her clasp. She seemed bewildered at this, and for a minute or two, felt in the air as though searching for some missing treasure,—then her arms fell passively on each side of her, seemingly inert and lifeless. El-Râmi bent over her half curiously, half anxiously,—his eyes dwelt on the ruby-like jewel that heaved gently up and down on her softly rounded bosom,—he watched the red play of light around it, and on the white satiny skin beneath,—and then,—all at once his sight grew dazzled and his brain began to swim. How lovely she was!—how much more than lovely! And how utterly she was his!—his, body and soul, and in his power! He was startled at the tenour of his own unbidden thoughts,—whence, in God's name, came these new impulses, these wild desires that fired his blood? . . . Furious with himself for what he deemed the weakness of his own emotions, he strove to regain the mastery over his nerves,—to settle his mind once more in its usual attitude of cold inflexibility and

indifferent composure,—but all in vain. Some subtle chord in his mental composition had been touched mysteriously, he knew not how, and had set all the other chords a-quivering;—and he felt himself all suddenly to be as subdued and powerless as when his mysterious visitor, the monk from Cyprus, had summoned up (to daunt him, as he thought) the strange vision of an Angel in his room.

Again he looked at Lilith;—again he resisted the temptation that assailed him to clasp her in his arms, to shower a lover's kisses on her lips, and thus waken her to the full bitter-sweet consciousness of earthly life,—till in the sharp extremity of his struggle, and loathing himself for his own folly, he suddenly dropped on his knees by the side of the couch and gazed with a vague wild entreaty at the tranquil loveliness that lay there so royally enshrined.

“Have mercy, Lilith!” he prayed half aloud, and scarcely conscious of his words. “If you are stronger in your weakness than I in my strength, have mercy! Repel me,—distrust me, disobey me—but do not love me! Make me not as one of the foolish for

whom a woman's smile, a woman's touch, are more than life, and more than wisdom. O let me not waste the labour of my days on a freak of passion!—let me not lose everything I have gained by long study and research, for the mere wild joy of an hour! Lilith, Lilith! Child, woman, angel!—whatever you are, have pity upon me! I dare not love you! . . . I dare not!"

So murmuring incoherently, he rose, and walking dizzily like a man abruptly startled from deep sleep, he went straight out of the room, never looking back once, else he might have seen how divinely, how victoriously Lilith smiled!





CHAPTER VIII.

REACHING his study, he shut himself in and locked the door,—and then sitting down, buried his head in his hands and fell to thinking. Such odd thoughts too!—they came unbidden, and chased one another in and out of his brain like will-o'-the-wisps in a wilderness. It was growing late, and Féraz had not yet returned,—but he heeded not the hour, or his brother's continued absence,—he was occupied in such a mental battle with his own inward forces as made him utterly indifferent to external things. The question he chiefly asked himself was this:—Of what use was all the science he had discovered and mastered, if he was not exempt,—utterly exempt from the emotions common to the most ignorant of men? His

pride had been that he was "above" human nature,—that he was able to look down upon its trivial joys and sorrows with a supreme and satiric scorn,—that he knew its ways so well as to be able to calculate its various hesitating moves in all directions, social and political, with very nearly exact accuracy. Why then was he shaken to the very centre of his being to-night, by the haunting vision of an angelic face and the echo of a sweet faint voice softly breathing the words—"My belovéd!" He could dominate others; why could he not dominate himself?

"This will never do!" he said aloud at last, starting up from his brooding attitude—"I must read—I must work,—I must, at all costs, get out of this absurd frame of mind into which I have unwittingly fallen. Besides, how often have I not assured myself that for all practical earthly considerations Lilith is dead—positively dead!"

And to reinstate himself in this idea, he unlocked his desk and took from it a small parchment volume in which he had carefully chronicled the whole account of his experiment on Lilith from the beginning. One

page was written in the form of a journal—the opposite leaf being reserved for “queries,” and the book bore the curious superscription “In Search of the Soul of Lilith” on its cover. The statement began at once without preamble, thus :—

“ *August 8, 18—.* 9 p.m.—Lilith, an Arab girl, aged twelve, dies in my arms. Cause of death, fever and inanition. Heart ceased to beat at ten minutes past eight this evening. While the blood is still warm in the corpse, I inject the ‘Electro-flamma’ under the veins, close beneath the heart. No immediate effect visible.

“ 11 p.m.—Arab women lay out Lilith’s corpse for burial. Questioned the people as to her origin. An orphan child, of poor parentage, no education, and unquiet disposition. Not instructed in religious matters, but following the religious customs of others by instinct and imitation. Distinctive features of the girl when in health—restlessness, temper, animalism, and dislike of restraint. Troublesome to manage, and not a thinking child by any means.

“ *August 9.* 5 a.m.—The caravan has just started on its way, leaving the corpse of Lilith with me. The woman Zaroba remains behind. Féraz I sent away last night in haste. I tell Zaroba part of my intention; she is superstitious and afraid of me, but willing to serve me. Lilith remains inanimate. I again use the ‘Electro-flamma,’ this time close to all the chief arteries. No sign of life.

“ *August 10.* Noon.—I begin rather to despair. As a last resource I have injected carefully a few drops of the ‘Flamma’ close to the brain; it is the mainspring of the whole machine, and if it can be set in motion——

“ *Midnight.* Victory! The brain has commenced to pulsate feebly, and the heart with it. Breathing has begun, but slowly and with difficulty. A faint colour has come into the hitherto waxen face. Success is possible now.

“ *August 15.*—During these last five days Lilith has breathed, and, to a certain extent, lived. She does not open her eyes, nor move a muscle of her body, and at times

still appears dead. She is kept alive (if it is life) by the vital fluid, and by that only. I must give her more time.

“*August 20.*—I have called her by name, and she has answered—but how strangely! Where does she learn the things she speaks of? She sees the Earth, she tells me, like a round ball circling redly in a cloud of vapours, and she hears music everywhere, and perceives a ‘light beyond.’ *Where and how does she perceive anything?*”

Here on the opposite side of the page was written the following “query,” which in this case was headed

“PROBLEM.”

“Given, a child’s brain, not wholly developed in its intellectual capacity, with no impressions save those which are purely material, and place that brain in a state of perpetual trance, *how does it come to imagine or comprehend things which science cannot prove?* Is it the Soul which conveys these impressions, and if so, *what is the Soul, and where is it?*”

El-Râmi read the passage over and over again, then, sighing impatiently, closed the book and put it by.

“Since I wrote that, what has she not said — what has she not told me!” he muttered; “and the ‘child’s brain’ is a child’s brain no longer, but a woman’s, while she has obtained absolutely no knowledge of any sort by external means. Yet she—she who was described by those who knew her in her former life as ‘not a thinking child, troublesome and difficult to manage,’ she it is who describes to me the scenery and civilization of Mars, the inhabitants of Sirius, the wonders of a myriad of worlds; she it is who talks of the ravishing beauty of things Divine and immortal, of the glory of the heavens, of the destined fate of the world. God knows it is very strange!—and the problem I wrote out six years ago is hardly nearer solving than it was then. If I could *believe*—but then I cannot—I must always doubt, and shall not doubt lead to discovery?”

Thus arguing with himself, and scoffing interiorly at the suggestion which just then

came unbidden to his mind—"Blessed are they which have not seen and yet believed"—he turned over some more papers and sorted them, with the intention and hope of detaching his thoughts entirely from what had suddenly become the too-enthralling subject of Lilith's beauteous personality. Presently he came upon a memorandum, over which he nodded and smiled with a sort of grim satirical content, entitled, "The Passions of the Human Animal as Nature made Him;" it was only a scrap—a hint of some idea which he had intended to make use of in literary work, but he read it over now with a good deal of curious satisfaction. It ran thus :

"Man, as a purely natural creature, fairly educated, but wholly unspiritualized, is a mental composition of : Hunger, Curiosity, Self - Esteem, Avarice, Cowardice, Lust, Cruelty, Personal Ambition ; and on these vile qualities alone our 'society' hangs together ; the virtues have no place anywhere, and do not count at all, save as conveniently pious metaphors."

"It is true!" he said aloud—"as true as the very light of the skies! Now am I,

or have I ever been, guilty of these common vices of ordinary nature? No, no; I have examined my own conscience too often and too carefully. I have been accused of personal ambition, but even that is a false accusation, for I do not seek vulgar rewards, or the noise of notoriety ringing about my name. All that I am seeking to discover is meant for the benefit of the world; that Humanity—poor, wretched, vicious Humanity—may know positively and finally that there *is* a Future. For till they *do* know it, beyond all manner of doubt, why should they strive to be better? Why should they seek to quell their animalism? Why should they need to be any better than they are? And why, above all things, should they be exhorted by their preachers and teachers to fasten their faith to a Myth, and anchor their hopes on a Dream?"

At that moment a loud and prolonged rattat-tatting at the street-door startled him,—he hastily thrust all his loose manuscripts into a drawer, and went to answer the summons, glancing at the clock as he passed it with an air of complete bewilderment,—for it was

close upon two a.m., and he could not imagine how the time had flown. He had scarcely set foot across the hall before another furious knocking began, and he stopped abruptly to listen to the imperative clatter with a curious wondering expression on his dark handsome face. When the noise ceased again, he began slowly to undo the door.

"Patience, my dear boy," he said, as he flung it open—"is a virtue, as you must have seen it set forth in copy-books. I provided you with a latch-key—where is it?—there could not be a more timely hour for its usage."

But while he spoke, Féraz, for it was he, had sprung in swiftly like some wild animal pursued by hunters, and he now stood in the hall, nearly breathless, staring confusedly at his brother with big, feverishly-bright bewildered eyes.

"Then I have escaped!" he said in a half-whisper—"I am at home,—really at home again!"

El-Râmi looked at him steadily,—then, turning away quietly, carefully shut and bolted the door.

"Have you spent a happy day, Féraz?" he gently inquired.

"Happy!" echoed Féraz—"Happy? Yes. No! Good God!—what do you mean by happiness?"

El-Râmi looked at him again, and making no reply to this adjuration, simply turned about and went into his study. Féraz followed.

"I know what you think," he said in pained accents—"You think I've been drinking—so I have. But I'm not drunk, for all that. They gave me wine—bad Burgundy—detestable champagne—the sun never shone on the grapes that made it,—and I took very little of it. It is not that which has filled me with a terror too real to deserve your scorn,—it is not that which has driven me home here to you for help and shelter——"

"It is somewhat late to be 'driven' home," remarked El-Râmi with a slightly sarcastic smile—"Two in the morning,—and—bad champagne or good,—you are talking, my dear Féraz, to say the least of it, rather wildly."

“For God’s sake do not sneer at me!” cried Féraz passionately—“I shall go mad if you do! Is it as late as you say?—I never knew it. I fled from them at midnight;—I have wandered about alone under the stars since then.”

At these words, El-Râmi’s expression changed from satire to compassion. His fine eyes softened, and their lustrous light grew deeper and more tender.

“Alone—and under the stars?” he repeated softly—“Are not the two things incompatible—to *you*? Have you not made the stars your companions—almost your friends?”

“No, no!” said Féraz, with a swift gesture of utter hopelessness. “Not now—not now! for all is changed. I see life as it is—hideous, foul, corruptible, cruel! and the once bright planets look pitiless; the heavens I thought so gloriously designed, are but an impenetrable vault arched over an ever-filling Grave. There is no light, no hope anywhere; how can there be in the face of so much sin? El-Râmi, why did you not tell me? why did you not warn me of the accursèd Evil of this pulsating movement men call Life? For it

seems *I* have not lived, I have only dreamed!"

And with a heavy sigh that seemed wrung from his very heart, he threw himself wearily into a chair, and buried his head between his hands in an attitude of utter dejection.

El-Râmi looked at him as he sat thus, with a certain shadow of melancholy on his own fine features, then he spoke gently :

"Who told you, Féraz, that you have not lived?" he asked.

"Zaroba did, first of all," returned Féraz reluctantly; "and now he, the artist Ainsworth, says the same thing. It seems that to men of the world I look a fool. I know nothing; I am as ignorant as a barbarian——"

"Of what?" queried his brother. "Of wine, loose women, the race-course and the gaming-table? Yes, I grant you, you are ignorant of these, and you may thank God for your ignorance. And these wise 'men of the world' who are so superior to you—in what does their wisdom consist?"

Féraz sat silent, wrapt in meditation. Presently he looked up; his lashes were wet, and his lips trembled.

"I wish," he murmured, "I wish I had never gone there,—I wish I had been content to stay with you."

El-Râmi laughed a little, but it was to hide a very different emotion.

"My dear fellow," he said lightly, "I am not an old woman that I should wish you to be tied to my apron-strings. Come, make a clean breast of it; if not the champagne, what is it that has so seriously disagreed with you?"

"Everything!" replied Féraz emphatically. "The whole day has been one of discord—what wonder then that I myself am out of tune! When I first started off from the house this morning, I was full of curious anticipation—I looked upon this invitation to an artist's studio as a sort of break in what I chose to call the even monotony of my existence,—I fancied I should imbibe new ideas, and be able to understand something of the artistic world of London if I spent the day with a man truly distinguished in his profession. When I arrived at the studio, Mr. Ainsworth was already at work—he was painting—a woman."

"Well?" said El-Râmi, seeing that Férâz paused, and stammered hesitatingly.

"She was nude,—this woman," he went on in a low shamed voice, a hot flush creeping over his delicate boyish face,—“A creature without any modesty or self-respect. A model, Mr. Ainsworth called her,—and it seems that she took his money for showing herself thus. Her body was beautiful; like a statue flushed with life,—but she was a devil, El-Râmi!—the foulness of her spirit was reflected in her bold eyes—the coarseness of her mind found echo in her voice,—and I—I sickened at the sight of her; I had never believed in the existence of fiends,—but *she* was one!”

El-Râmi was silent, and Férâz resumed—

"As I tell you, Ainsworth was painting her, and he asked me to sit beside him and watch his work. His request surprised me,—I said to him in a whisper, ‘Surely she will resent the presence of a stranger?’ He stared at me. ‘She? Whom do you mean?’ he inquired. ‘The woman there,’ I answered. He burst out laughing, called me ‘an innocent,’ and said she was perfectly accustomed

to 'pose' before twenty men at a time, so that I need have no scruples on that score. So I sat down as he bade me, and watched in silence, and thought——"

"Ah, what did you think?" asked El-Râmi.

"I thought evil things," answered Féraz deliberately. "And, while thinking them, I knew they were evil. And I put my own nature under a sort of analysis, and came to the conclusion that, when a man does wrong, he is perfectly aware that it *is* wrong, and that, therefore, doing wrong deliberately and consciously, he has no right to seek forgiveness, either through Christ or any other intermediary. He should be willing to bear the brunt of it, and his prayers should be for punishment, not for pardon."

"A severe doctrine," observed El-Râmi. "Strangely so, for a young man who has not 'lived,' but only 'dreamed.'"

"In my dreams I see nothing evil," said Féraz, "and I think nothing evil. All is harmonious; all works in sweet accordance with a Divine and Infinite plan, of whose ultimate perfection I am sure. I would rather

dream so, than live as I have lived to-day."

El-Râmi forbore to press him with any questions, and, after a little pause, he went on :

"When that woman—the model—went away from the studio, I was as thankful as one might be for the removal of a plague. She dropped a curtain over her bare limbs and disappeared like some vanishing evil spirit. Then Ainsworth asked me to sit to him. I obeyed willingly. He placed me in a half-sitting, half-recumbent attitude, and began to sketch. Suddenly, after about half an hour, it occurred to me that he perhaps wanted to put me in the same picture with that fiend who had gone, and I asked him the question point-blank. 'Why, certainly!' he said. 'You will appear as the infatuated lover of that lady, in my great Academy work.' Then, El-Râmi, some suppressed rage in me broke loose. I sprang up and confronted him angrily. 'Never!' I cried. 'You shall never picture me thus! If you dared to do it, I would rip your canvas to shreds on the very walls of the Academy

itself! I am no "model," to sell my personality to you for gold!' He laughed in that lazy, unmirthful way of his. 'No,' he said, 'you are certainly not a model, you are a tiger—a young tiger—quite furious and untamed. I wish you *would* go and rip up my picture on the Academy walls, as you say; it would make my fortune; I should have so many orders for duplicates. My dear fellow, if you won't let me put you into my canvas, you are no use to me. I want your meditative face for the face of a poet destroyed by a passion for Phryne. I really think you might oblige me.' 'Never!' I said; 'the thing would be a libel and a lie. My face is not the face you want. You want a weak face, a round foolish brow, and a receding chin. Why, as God made me, and as I am, every one of my features would falsify your picture's story! The man who voluntarily sacrifices his genius and his hopes of heaven to vulgar vice and passion, must have weakness in him somewhere, and as a true artist you are bound to show that weakness in the features you portray.' 'And have you no weakness, you young savage?' he asked.

‘Not that weakness!’ I said. ‘The wretched incapacity of will that brings the whole soul down to a grovelling depth of materialism—that is not in me!’ I spoke angrily, El-Râmi, perhaps violently; but I could not help myself. He stared at me curiously, and began drawing lines on his palette with his brush dipped in colour. ‘You are a very singular young fellow,’ he said at last. ‘But I must tell you that it was the fair Irene Vassilius who suggested to me that your face would be suitable for that of the poet in my picture. I wanted to please her——’ ‘You will please her more by telling her what I say,’ I interrupted him abruptly. ‘Tell her——’ ‘That you are a new Parsifal,’ he said mockingly. ‘Ah, she will never believe it! All men in her opinion are either brutes or cowards.’ Then he took up a fresh square of canvas, and added: ‘Well, I promise you I will not put you in my picture, as you have such a rooted objection to figuring in public as a slave of Phryne, though, I assure you, most young fellows would be proud of such a distinction; for one is hardly considered a “man” nowadays unless one professes to be

“in love”—God save the mark!—with some female beast of the stage or the music-hall. Such is life, my boy! There! now sit still with that look of supreme scorn on your countenance, and that will do excellently.’ ‘On your word of honour, you will not place me in your picture?’ I said. ‘On my word of honour,’ he replied. So, of course, I could not doubt him. And he drew my features on his canvas quickly, and with much more than ordinary skill; and, when he had finished his sketch, he took me out to lunch with him at a noisy, crowded place, called the ‘Criterion.’ There were numbers of men and women there, eating and drinking, all of a low type, I thought, and some of them of a most vulgar and insolent bearing, more like dressed-up monkeys than human beings, I told Ainsworth; but he laughed, and said they were very fair specimens of civilized society. Then, after lunch, we went to a Club, where several men were smoking and throwing cards about. They asked me to play, and I told them I knew nothing of the game. Whereupon they explained it; and I said it seemed to me to be quite an imbecile

method of losing money. Then they laughed uproariously. One said I was 'very fresh,' whatever that might mean. Another asked Ainsworth what he had brought me there for, and Ainsworth answered: 'To show you one of the greatest wonders of the century—a really *young* man in his youth,' and then they laughed again. Later on he took me into the Park. There I saw Madame Vassilius in her carriage. She looked fair and cold, and proud and weary all at once. Her horses came to a standstill under the trees, and Ainsworth went up and spoke to her. She looked at me very earnestly as she gave me her hand, and only said one thing: 'What a pity you are not with your brother!' I longed to ask her why, but she seemed unwilling to converse, and soon gave the signal to her coachman to drive on—in fact, she went at once out of the Park. Then Ainsworth got angry and sullen, and said: 'I hate intellectual women! That pretty scribbler has made so much money that she is perfectly independent of man's help—and, being independent, she is insolent.' I was surprised at his tone. I said I could not see

where he perceived the insolence. ‘Can you not?’ he asked. ‘She studies men instead of loving them; that is where she is insolent—and—insufferable!’ He was so irritated that I did not pursue the subject, and he then pressed me to stay and dine with him. I accepted—and I am sorry I did.”

“Why?” asked El-Râmi in purposely indifferent tones. “At present, so far as you have told me, your day seems to have passed in a very harmless manner. A peep at a model, a lunch at the Criterion, a glance at a gaming-club, a stroll in the Park—what could be more ordinary? There is no tragedy in it, such as you seem inclined to imagine; it is all the merest bathos.”

Féraz looked up indignantly, his eyes sparkling.

“Is there nothing tragic in the horrible, stifling, strangling consciousness of evil surrounding one like a plague?” he demanded passionately. “To know and to feel that God is far off, instead of near; that one is shut up in a prison of one’s own making, where sweet air and pure light cannot penetrate; to be perfectly conscious that one is moving

and speaking with difficulty and agitation in a thick, choking atmosphere of lies—lies—all lies! Is that not tragic? Is that all bathos?"

"My dear fellow, it is life!" said El-Râmi sedately. "It is what you wanted to see, to know, and to understand."

"It is *not* life!" declared Férâz hotly. "The people who accept it as such, are fools, and delude themselves. Life, as God gave it to us, is beautiful and noble—grandly suggestive of the Future beyond; but you will not tell me there is anything beautiful or noble or suggestive in the life led by such men and women as I saw to-day. With the exception of Madame Vassilius—and she, I am told, is considered eccentric and a 'visionary'—I have seen no one who would be worth talking to for an hour. At Ainsworth's dinner, for instance, there were some men who called themselves artists, and they talked, not of art, but of money; how much they could get, and how much they *would* get from certain patrons of theirs whom they called 'full-pursed fools.' Well, and that woman—that model I told you of—actually came to dine at Ainsworth's table, and

other coarse women like her. Surely, El-Râmi, you can imagine what their conversation was like? And as the time went on things became worse. There was no restraint, and at last I could stand it no longer. I rose up from the table, and left the room without a word. Ainsworth followed me; he was flushed with wine, and he looked foolish. 'Where are you going?' he asked. 'Mamie Dillon,' that was the name of his model, 'wants to talk to you.' I made him no answer. 'Where are you going?' he repeated angrily. 'Home, of course,' I replied, 'I have stayed here too long as it is. Let me pass.' He was excited; he had taken too much wine, I know, and he scarcely knew what he was saying. 'Oh, I understand you!' he exclaimed. 'You and Irene Vassilius are of a piece—all purity, eh! all disgust at the manners and customs of the "lower animals." Well, I tell you we are no worse than anyone else in modern days. My lord the duke's conversation differs very little from that of his groom; and the latest imported American heiress in search of a title, rattles on to the full as volubly and ruthlessly

as Mamie Dillon. Go home, if go you must ; and take my advice, if you don't like what you've seen in the world to-day, *stay* home for good. Stay in your shell, and dream your dreams ; I dare say they will profit you quite as much as our realities !' He laughed, and as I left him I said, ' You mistake ! it is you who are "dreaming," as you call it ; dreaming a bad dream, too ; it is I who *live*.' Then I went out of the house, as I tell you, and wandered alone, under the stars, and thought bitter things."

" Why 'bitter' ? " asked El-Râmi.

" I do not know," returned Féraz moodily, " except that all the world seemed wrong. I wondered how God could endure so much degradation on the face of one of his planets, without some grand, Divine protest."

" The protest is always there," said El-Râmi quickly. " Silent, but eternal, in the existence of Good in the midst of Evil."

Féraz lifted his eyes and rested their gaze on his brother with an expression of unutterable affection.

" El-Râmi, keep me with you ! " he entreated ; " never let me leave you again ! I

think I must be crazed if the world is what it *seems*, and my life is so entirely opposed to it ; but if so, I would rather be crazed than sane. In my wanderings to-night, on my way home hither, I met young girls and women who must have been devils in disguise, so utterly were they lost to every sense of womanhood and decency. I saw men, evil-looking and wretched, who seemed waiting but the chance to murder, or commit any other barbarous crime for gold. I saw little children, starving and in rags ; old and feeble creatures, too, in the last stage of destitution, without a passer-by to wish them well ; all things seemed foul and dark and hopeless, and when I entered here, I felt—ah, God knows what I felt !—that you were my Providence, that this was my home, and that surely some Angel dwelt within and hallowed it with safety and pure blessing !”

A sudden remorse softened his voice, his beautiful eyes were dim with tears.

“ He remembers and thinks of Lilith !” thought El-Râmi quickly, with a singular jealous tightening emotion at his heart ; but aloud he said gently :

“ If one day in the ‘ world ’ has taught you to love this simple abode of ours, my dear Féraz, more than you did before, you have had a most valuable lesson. But do not be too sure of yourself. Remember, you resented my authority, and you wished to escape from my influence. Well, now——”

“ Now I voluntarily place myself under both,” said Féraz, rising and standing before him with bent head. “ El-Râmi, my brother and my friend, do with me as you will ! If from you come my dreams, in God’s name let me dream ! If from your potent will, exerted on my spirit, springs the fountain of the music which haunts my life, let me ever be a servant of that will ! With you I have had happiness, health, peace, and mysterious joy, such as the world could never comprehend ; away from you, though only for a day, I have been miserable. Take my complete obedience, El-Râmi, for what it is worth ; you give me more than my life’s submission can ever repay.”

El-Râmi stepped up more closely to him, and laying both hands on his shoulders, looked him seriously in the eyes.

“ My dear boy, consider for a moment how you involve yourself,” he said earnestly, yet with great kindliness. “ Remember the old Arabic volume you chanced upon, and what it said concerning the mystic powers of ‘influence.’ Did you quite realize it, and all that it implies?”

Féraz met his searching gaze steadily.

“ Quite,” he replied. “ So much and so plainly do I realize it, that I can attribute everything done in the world to ‘influence.’ Each one of us is ‘influenced’ by something or someone. Even you, my dearest brother share the common lot, though I dare say you do not quite perceive where your ruling force is generated, your own powers being so extraordinary. Ainsworth, for example, is ‘influenced’ in very opposite directions by very opposite forces — Irene Vassilius, and—his Mamie Dillon! Now I would rather have *your* spell laid upon my life than that of the speculator, the gambler, the drinker, or the vile woman, for none of these can possibly give satisfaction, at least not to me ; while your wizard wand invokes nothing but beauty, harmony, and peace of conscience.

So I repeat it, El-Râmi, I submit to you utterly and finally—must I entreat you to accept my submission?”

He smiled, and the old happy look that he was wont to wear began to radiate over his face, which had till then seemed worn and wearied. El-Râmi's dark features appeared to reflect the smile, as he gently touched his brother's clustering curls, and said playfully :

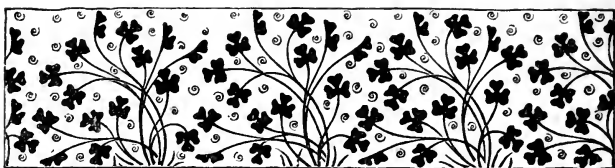
“ In spite of Zaroba ?”

“ In spite of Zaroba,” echoed Féraz mirthfully. “ Poor Zaroba ! she does not seem well, or happy. I fear she has offended you ?”

“ No, no,” said El-Râmi meditatively, “ she has not offended me ; she is too old to offend me. I cannot be angry with sorrowful and helpless age. And if she is not well, we will make her well, and if she is not happy, we will make her happy, . . . and be happy ourselves—shall it not be so ?” His voice was very soft, and he seemed to talk at random, and to be conscious of it, for he roused himself with a slight start, and said in firmer tones : “ Good-night, Féraz ; good-night, dear lad. Rest, and dream !”

He smiled as Féraz impulsively caught his hand and kissed it, and after the young man had left the room he still stood, lost in a reverie, murmuring under his breath : “ And be happy ourselves ! Is that possible—could that be possible—in *this* world ? ”





CHAPTER IX.

NEXT day towards noon, while Féráz, tired with his brief "worldly" experiences, was still sleeping, El-Râmi sought out Zaroba. She received him in the ante-room of the chamber of Lilith with more than her customary humility; her face was dark and weary, and her whole aspect one of resigned and settled melancholy. El-Râmi looked at her kindly, and with compassion.

"The sustaining of wrath is an injury to the spirit," he wrote on the slate which served for that purpose in his usual way of communication with her; "I no longer mistrust you. Once more I say, be faithful and obedient. I ask no more. The spell of silence shall be lifted from your lips to-day."

She read swiftly, and with apparent incre-

dulity, and a tremor passed over her tall, gaunt frame. She looked at him wonderingly and wistfully, while he, standing before her, returned the look steadfastly, and seemed to be concentrating all his thoughts upon her with some fixed intention. After a minute or two he turned aside, and again wrote on the slate ; this time the words ran thus :

“ Speak ; you are at liberty.”

With a deep shuddering sigh, she extended her hands appealingly.

“ Master !” she exclaimed ; and before he could prevent her, she had dropped on her knees. “ Forgive—forgive !” she muttered. “ Terrible is thy power, O El-Râmi, ruler of spirits ! terrible, mystic and wonderful ! God must have given thee thy force, and I am but the meanest of slaves to rebel against thy command. Yet out of wisdom comes not happiness, but great grief and pain ; and as I live, El-Râmi, in my rebellion I but dreamed of a love that should bring thee joy ! Pardon the excess of my zeal, for lo, again and yet again I swear fidelity ! and may all the curses of heaven fall on me if this time I break my vow !”

She bent her head—she would have kissed the floor at his feet, but that he quickly raised her up and prevented her.

“There is nothing more to pardon,” he wrote. “Your wisdom is possibly greater than mine. I know there is nothing stronger than Love, nothing better perhaps ; but Love is my foe whom I must vanquish,—lest he should vanquish me !”

And while Zaroba yet pored over these words, her black eyes dilating with amazement at the half confession of weakness implied in them, he turned away and left the room.

That afternoon a pleasant sense of peace and restfulness seemed to settle upon the little household ; delicious strains of melody filled the air ; Féraz, refreshed in mind and body by a sound sleep, was seated at the piano, improvising strange melodies in his own exquisitely wild and tender fashion ; while El-Râmi, seated at his writing-table, indited a long letter to Dr. Kremlin at Ilfracombe, giving in full the message left for him by the mysterious monk from Cyprus respecting the “ Third Ray ” or signal from Mars.

“Do not weary yourself too much with watching this phenomenon,” he wrote to his friend. “From all accounts, it will be a difficult matter to track so rapid a flash on the Disc as the one indicated, and I have fears for your safety. I cannot give any satisfactory cause for my premonition of danger to you in the attempt, because if we do not admit an end to anything, then there can be no danger even in death itself, which we are accustomed to look upon as an ‘end,’ when it may be *proved* to be only a beginning. But, putting aside the idea of ‘danger’ or ‘death,’ the premonition remains in my mind as one of ‘change’ for you ; and perhaps you are not ready or willing even to accept a different sphere of action to your present one, therefore I would say, take heed to yourself when you follow the track of the ‘Third Ray.’”

Here his pen stopped abruptly ; Féraz was singing in a soft mezza-voce, and he listened :

O Sweet, if love obtained must slay desire,
And quench the light and heat of passion's fire ;
If you are weary of the ways of love,
And fain would end the many cares thereof,

I prithee tell me so that I may seek
Some place to die in ere I grow too weak
To look my last on your belovèd face.
Yea, tell me all ! The gods may yet have grace
And pity enough to let me quickly die
Some brief while after we have said ' Good-bye !'

Nay, I have known it well for many days
You have grown tired of all tender ways ;
Love's kisses weary you, love's eager words,
Old as the hills and sweet as singing-birds,
Are fetters hard to bear ! O love, be free !
You will lose little joy in losing me ;
Let me depart, remembering only this,
That once you loved me, and that once your kiss
Crown'd me with joy supreme enough to last
Through all my life till that brief life be past.

Forget me, Sweetest-heart, and nevermore
Turn to look back on what has gone before,
Or say, ' Such love was brief, but wondrous fair ;'
The past is past forever ; have no care
Or thought for me at all, no tear or sigh,
Or faint regret ; for, Dearest, I shall die
And dream of you i' the dark, beneath the grass ;
And o'er my head perchance your feet may pass,
Lulling me faster into sleep profound
Among the fairies of the fruitful ground.
Love wearied out by love, hath need of rest.
And when all love is ended, Death is best.

The song ceased ; but though the singer's
voice no longer charmed the silence, his
fingers still wandered over the keys of the
piano, devising intricate passages of melody
as delicate and devious as the warbling

of nightingales. El-Râmi, unconsciously to himself, heaved a deep sigh, and Férâz, hearing it, looked round.

“Am I disturbing you?” he asked.

“No. I love to hear you; but, like many youthful poets, you sing of what you scarcely understand—love, for instance; you know nothing of love.”

“I imagine I do,” replied Férâz meditatively. “I can picture my ideal woman; she is——”

“Fair, of course!” said El-Râmi, with an indulgent smile.

“Yes, fair; her hair must be golden, but not uniformly so—full of lights and shadows, suggestive of some halo woven round her brows by the sunlight, or the caressing touch of an angel. She must have deep, sweet eyes in which no actual colour is predominant; for a pronounced blue or black does away with warmth of expression. She must not be tall, for one cannot caress tall women without a sense of the ludicrous spoiling sentiment——”

“Have you tried it?” asked El-Râmi, laughing.

Féraz laughed too.

"You know I have not; I only imagine the situation. To explain more fully what I mean, I would say one could more readily draw into one's arms the Venus of Medicis than that of Milo—one could venture to caress a Psyche, but scarcely a Juno. I have never liked the idea of tall women, they are like big handsome birds—useful, no doubt, but not half so sweet as the little fluttering singing ones."

"Well, and what other attributes must this imagined lady of yours possess?" asked El-Râmi, vaguely amused at his brother's earnestness.

"Oh, many more charms than I could enumerate," replied Féraz. "And of one thing I am certain, she is not to be found on this earth. But I am quite satisfied to wait; I shall find her, even as she will find me some day. Meanwhile I 'imagine' love, and in imagination I almost feel it."

He went on playing, and El-Râmi resumed the writing of his letter to Kremlin, which he soon finished and addressed ready for post. A gentle knock at the street-door made itself

heard just then through the ebb and flow of Féraz's music, and Féraz left off his improvisation abruptly and went to answer the summons. He returned, and announced with some little excitement :

“Madame Irene Vassilius.”

El-Râmi rose and advanced to meet his fair visitor, bowing courteously.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Madame,” he said, the sincerity of his welcome showing itself in the expression of his face, “and an unmerited honour for which I am grateful.”

She smiled, allowing her hand to rest in his for a moment ; then, accepting the low chair which Féraz placed for her near his brother's writing-table, she seated herself, and lifted her eyes to El-Râmi's countenance—eyes which, like those of Féraz's ideal ladye-love, were “deep and sweet, and of no pronounced colour.”

“I felt you would not resent my coming here as an intrusion,” she began ; “but my visit is not one of curiosity. I do not want to probe you as to your knowledge of my past, or to ask you anything as to my future. I am a lonely creature, disliked by many

people, and in the literary career I have adopted I fight a desperately hard battle, and often crave for a little—just a little sympathetic comprehension. One or two questions puzzle me which you might answer if you would. They are on almost general subjects ; but I should like to have your opinion."

"Madame, if you, with your exceptional gifts of insight and instinct, are baffled in these 'general' questions," said El-Râmi, "shall not I be baffled also?"

"That does not follow," replied Irene, returning his glance steadily, "for you men always claim to be wiser than women. I do not agree with this fiat, so absolutely set forth by the lords of creation ; yet I am not what is termed 'strong-minded,' I simply seek justice. Pray stay with us," she added, turning to Féraz, who was about to retire, as he usually did whenever El-Râmi held an interview with any visitor ; "there is no occasion for you to go away."

Féraz hesitated, glancing at his brother.

"Yes, by all means remain here, Féraz," said El-Râmi gently, "since Madame Vassilius desires it."

Delighted with the permission, Féraz ensconced himself in a corner with a book, pretending to read, but in reality listening to every word of the conversation. He liked to hear Irene's voice—it was singularly sweet and ringing, and at times had a peculiar thrill of pathos in it that went straight to the heart.

“You know,” she went on, “that I am, or am supposed to be, what the world calls ‘famous.’ That is, I write books which the public clamour for and read, and for which I receive large sums of money. I am able to live well, dress well, and look well, and I am known as one of society’s ‘celebrities.’ Well, now, can you tell me why, for such poor honours as these, men, supposed to be our wiser and stronger superiors, are so spitefully jealous of a woman’s fame?”

“Jealous?” echoed El-Râmi dubiously, and with something of hesitation. “You mean——”

“I mean what I say,” continued Madame Vassilius calmly; “neither more nor less. Spitefully jealous is the term I used. Explain to me this riddle: Why do men en-

courage women to every sort of base folly and vanity that may lead them at length to become the slaves of man's lust and cruelty, and yet take every possible means to oppose and hinder them in their attempts to escape from sensuality and animalism into intellectual progress and pre-eminence? In looking back on the history of all famous women, from Sappho downwards to the present time, it is amazing to consider what men have said of them. Always a sneer at 'women's work.' And if praise is at any time given, how grudging and half-hearted it is! Men will enter no protest against women who uncover their bare limbs to the public gaze and dance lewdly in music-halls and theatres for the masculine delectation; they will defend the street-prostitute; they will pledge themselves and their family estates in order to provide jewels for the newest 'ballerina'; but for the woman of intellect they have nothing but a shrug of contempt. If she produces a great work of art in literature, it is never thoroughly acknowledged; and the hard blows delivered on Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Georges Sand, and others of their calibre, far out-

weighed their laurels. George Eliot and Georges Sand took men's names in order to shelter themselves a little from the pitiless storm that assails literary work known to emanate from a woman's brain; but let a man write the veriest trash that ever was printed, he will still be accredited by his own sex with something better than ever the cleverest woman could compass. How is it that the 'superior' sex are cowardly enough to throw stones at those among the 'inferior,' who surpass their so-called lords and masters both in chastity and intellect?"

She spoke earnestly, her eyes shining with emotion; she looked lovely, thus inspired by the strength of her inward feelings. El-Râmi was taken aback. Like most Orientals, he had to a certain extent despised women and their work. But, then, what of Lilith? Without her aid would his discoveries in spiritual science have progressed so far? Had he or any man a right to call woman the "inferior" sex?

"Madame," he said slowly and with a vague embarrassment, "you bring an accusation against our sex which it is impossible to

refute, because it is simply and undeniably true. Men do not love either chastity or intellect in women."

He paused, looking at her, then went on :

"A chaste woman is an embodied defiance and reproach to man ; an intellectual woman is always a source of irritation, because she is invariably his superior. By this I mean that when a woman is thoroughly gifted, she is gifted all round ; an intellectual man is generally only gifted in one direction. For example, a great poet, painter, or musician, may be admirable in his own line, but he generally lacks in something ; he is stupid, perhaps, in conversation, or he blunders in some way by want of tact ; but a truly brilliant woman has all the charms of mental superiority, generally combined with delicate touches of satire, humour, and wit,—points which she uses to perfection against the lumbering animal Man, with the result that she succeeds in pricking him in all his most vulnerable parts. He detests her accordingly, and flies for consolation to the empty-headed dolls of the music-hall, who flatter him to the top of his bent, in order to get as much

champagne and as many diamonds as they can out of him. Man must be adored ; he insists upon it, even if he pays for it."

"It is a pity he does not make himself a little more worthy of adoration," said Irene, with a slight scornful smile.

"It is," agreed El-Râmi ; "but most men, even the ugliest and stupidest, consider themselves perfect."

"Do you?" she asked suddenly.

"Do I consider myself perfect?" El-Râmi smiled, and reflected on this point. "Madame, if I am frank with you, and with myself, I must answer 'Yes!' I am made of the same clay as all my sex, and consider myself worthy to be the conqueror of any woman under the sun! Ask any loathsome, crook-backed dwarf that sweeps a crossing for his livelihood, and his idea of his own personal charm will be the same."

Féraz laughed outright ; Madame Vassilius looked amused and interested.

"You can never eradicate from the masculine nature," proceeded El-Râmi, "the idea that our attentions, no matter how uncouth, are, and always must be, agreeable to the

feminine temperament. Here you have the whole secret of the battle carried on by men, against women who have won the prize of a world-wide fame. An intellectual woman sets a barrier between herself and the beasts ; the beasts howl, but cannot leap it ; hence their rage. You, Madame, are not only intellectual, but lovely to look at ; you stand apart, a crowned queen, seeking no assistance from men ; by your very manner you imply your scorn of their low and base desires. They *must* detest you in self-defence ; most of your adverse critics are the poorly paid hacks of the daily journals, who envy you your house, your horses, your good fortune, and your popularity with the public ; if you want them to admire you, go in for a big scandal. Run away with some blackguard ; have several husbands ; do something to tarnish your woman's reputation ; be a vulture or a worm, not a star ; men do not care for stars, they are too distant, too cold, too pure !"

"Are you speaking satirically," asked Madame Vassilius, "or in grim earnest ?"

"In grim earnest, fair lady," and El-Râmi rose from his chair and confronted her with

a half-smile. "In grim earnest, men are brutes! The statement is one which is frequently made by what is called the 'Shrieking Sisterhood'; but I, a man, agree to it in cold blood, without conditions. We are stupid brutes; we work well in gangs, but not so well singly. As soldiers, sailors, builders, engineers, labourers, all on the gang method, we are admirable. The finest paintings of the world were produced by bodies of men working under one head, called 'schools,' but differing from our modern 'schools' in this grand exception, that whereas *now* each pupil tries his hand at something of his own, *then* all the pupils worked at the one design of the Master. Thus were painted the frescoes of Michael Angelo, and the chief works of Raphael. Now the rule is 'every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.' And very poorly does 'each man for himself' succeed. Men must always be helped along, either by each other—or . . . by . . . a woman! Many of them owe all their success in life to the delicate management and patient tact of woman, and yet never have the grace to own it. Herein we are thankless brutes as well

as stupid. But, as far as I personally am concerned, I am willing to admit that all my best discoveries, such as they are, are due to the far-reaching intelligence and pure insight of a woman."

This remark utterly amazed Féraz ; Madame Vassilius looked surprised and interested.

"Then," she said, smiling slightly, "of course you love someone?"

A shadow swept over El-Râmi's features.

"No, Madame ; I am not capable of love, as this world understands loving. Love has existence no doubt, but surely not as Humanity accepts it. For example, a man loves a woman ; she dies ; he gradually forgets her, and loves another, and so on. That is not love, but it is what society is satisfied with, as such. You are quite right to despise such a fleeting emotion for yourself ; it is not sufficient for the demands of your nature ; you seek something more lasting."

"Which I shall never find," said Irene quietly.

"Which you will find, and which you must find," declared El-Râmi. "All longings,

however vague, whether evil or good, are bound to be fulfilled, there being no waste in the economy of the universe. This is why it is so necessary to weigh well the results of desire before encouraging it. I quite understand your present humour, Madame—it is one of restlessness and discontent. You find your crown of fame has thorns ; never mind ! wear it royally, though the blood flows from the torn brows. You are solitary at times, and find the solitude irksome ; Art serves her children thus—she will accept no half-love, but takes all. Were I asked to name one of the most fortunate of women, I think I should name you, for notwithstanding the progress of your intellectual capacity, you have kept your faith.”

“ I have kept my religion, if you mean that,” said Irene, impressed by his earnestness ; “ but it is not the religion of the churches.”

He gave an impatient gesture.

“ The religion of the churches is a mere Show-Sunday,” he returned. “ We all know that. When I say you have kept your faith, I mean that you can believe in God without

positive proofs of Him. That is a grand capability in this age. I wish I had it !”

Irene Vassilius looked at him wonderingly.

“ Surely you believe in God ? ”

“ Not till I can *prove* Him ! ” and El-Râmi’s eyes flashed defiantly. “ Vice triumphant, and Virtue vanquished, do not explain Him to me. Torture and death do not manifest to my spirit His much-talked-of ‘ love and goodness. ’ I must unriddle His secret ; I must pierce into the heart of His plan, before I join the enforced laudations of the multitude ; I must know and feel that it is the Truth I am proclaiming, before I stand up in the sight of my fellows and say, ‘ O God, Thou art the Fountain of Goodness, and all Thy works are wise and wonderful ! ’ ”

He spoke with remarkable power and emphasis ; his attitude was full of dignity. Madame Vassilius gazed at him in involuntary admiration.

“ It is a bold spirit that undertakes to catechize the Creator and examine into the value of His creation,” she said.

“ If there is a Creator,” said El-Râmi, “ and if from Him all things do come, then

from Him also comes my spirit of inquiry. I have no belief in a devil, but if there were one, the Creator is answerable for him, too. And to revert again to your questions, Madame, shall we not in a way make God somewhat responsible for the universal prostitution of woman? It is a world-wide crime, and only very slight attempts as yet have been made to remedy it, because the making of the laws is in the hands of men — the criminals. The Englishman, the European generally, is as great a destroyer of woman's life and happiness as any Turk or other barbarian. The life of the average woman is purely animal; in her girlhood she is made to look attractive, and her days pass in the consideration of dress, appearance, manner, and conversation; when she has secured her mate, her next business is to bear him children. The children reared, and sent out into the world, she settles down into old age, wrinkled, fat, toothless, and frequently quarrelsome; the whole of her existence is not a grade higher than that of a leopardess or other forest creature, and sometimes not so exciting. When a woman rises

above all this, she is voted by the men 'unwomanly'; she is no longer the slave or the toy of their passions; and that is why, my dear Madame, they give the music-hall dancer their diamonds, and heap upon *you* their sneers."

Irene sat silent for some minutes, and a sigh escaped her.

"Then it is no use trying to be a little different to the rest," she said wearily; "a little higher, a little less prone to vulgarity? If one must be hated for striving to be worthy of one's vocation——"

"My dear lady, you do not see that man will never admit that literature *is* your vocation! No, not even if you wrote as grand a tragedy as 'Macbeth.' Your vocation, according to them, is to adore their sex, to look fascinating, to wear pretty clothes, and purr softly like a pleased cat when they make you a compliment; not to write books that set everybody talking. They would rather see you dragged and worn to death under the burden of half a dozen children, than they would see you stepping disdainfully past them, in all the glory of fame. Yet be con-

tent,—you have, like Mary in the Gospel, ‘chosen the better part’; of that I feel sure, though I am unable to tell you why or how I feel it.”

“If you feel sure of certain things without being able to explain how or why you feel them,” put in Féraz suddenly, “is it not equally easy to feel sure of God without being able to explain how or why He exists?”

“Admirably suggested, my dear Féraz,” observed El-Râmi, with a slight smile. “But please recollect that though it may be easy to you and a fair romancist like Madame Vassilius to feel sure of God, it is not at all easy to me. I am not sure of Him; I have not seen Him, and I am not conscious of Him. Moreover, if an average majority of people taken at random could be persuaded to speak the truth for once in their lives, they would all say the same thing—that they are not conscious of Him. Because if they were—if the world were—the emotion of Fear would be altogether annihilated; there would never be any ‘panic’ about anything; people would not shriek and wail at the

terrors of an earthquake, or be seized with pallor and trembling at the crash and horror of an unexpected storm. Being sure of God would mean being sure of Good; and I'm afraid none of us are convinced in that direction. But I think and believe that if we indeed felt sure of God, Evil would be annihilated as well as fear. And the mystery is, why does He not *make* us sure of Him? It must be in His power to do so, and would save both Him and us an infinite deal of trouble."

Féraz grew restless and left his place, laying down the volume he had been pretending to read.

"I wish you would not be so horribly, cruelly *definite* in your suggestions," he said rather vexedly. "What is the good of it? It unsettles one's mind."

"Surely your mind is not unsettled by a merely reasonable idea reasonably suggested?" returned El-Râmi calmly. "Madame Vassilius here is not 'unsettled,' as you call it."

"No," said Irene slowly; "but I had thought you more of a spiritual believer——"

“Madame,” said El-Râmi impressively, “I am a spiritual believer, but in this way : I believe that this world and all worlds are composed of Spirit and Matter, and not only do I believe it, but I *know* it ! The atmosphere around us and all planets is composed of Spirit and Matter ; and every living creature that breathes is made of the same dual mixture. Of the Spirit that forms part of Matter and dominates it, I, even *I* have some control ; and others who come after me, treading in the same lines of thought, will have more than I. I can influence the spirit of man ; I can influence the spirit of the air ; I can draw an essence from the earth upwards that shall seem to you like the wraith of someone dead ; but if you ask me whether these provable, practicable scientific tests or experiments on the spirit that is part of Nature’s very existence, are manifestations of God or the Divine, I say—No. God would not permit Man to play at will with His eternal Fires ; whereas, with the spirit essence that can be chemically drawn from earth and fire and water, I, a mere studious and considering biped, can do whatsoever I

choose. I know how the legends of phantoms and fairies arose in the world's history, because at one time, one particular period of the pre-historic ages, the peculiar, yet natural combination of the elements and the atmosphere, *formed* 'fantasma' which men saw and believed in. The last trace of these now existing is the familiar 'mirage' of cities with their domes and steeples seen during certain states of the atmosphere in mid-ocean. Only give me the conditions, and I will summon up a ghostly city too. I can form numberless phantasmal figures now, and more than this, I can evoke for your ears from the very bosom of the air, music such as long ago sounded for the pleasure of men and women dead. For the air is a better phonograph than Edison's, and has the advantage of being eternal."

"But such powers are marvellous!" exclaimed Irene. "I cannot understand how you have attained to them."

"Neither can others less gifted understand how you, Madame, have attained your literary skill," said El-Râmi. "All art, all science, all discovery, is the result of a

concentrated Will, an indomitable Perseverance. My 'powers,' as you term them, are really very slight, and, as I said before, those who follow my track will obtain far greater supremacy. The secret of phantasmal splendour or 'vision,' as also the clue to what is called 'unearthly music'—anything and everything that is or appears to be of a supernatural character in this world—can be traced to natural causes, and the one key to it all is the great Fact that Nothing in the Universe is lost. Bear that statement well in mind. Light preserves all scenes; Air preserves all sounds. Therefore, it follows that if the scenes are there, and the sounds are there, they can be evoked again, and yet again, by him who has the skill to understand the fluctuations of the atmospheric waves, and the incessantly recurring vibrations of light. Do not imagine that even a Thought, which you very naturally consider your own, actually remains a fixture in your brain from whence it was germinated. It escapes while you are in the very act of thinking it; its subtle essence evaporates into the air you breathe and the

light you absorb. If it presents itself to you again, it will probably be in quite a different form, and perhaps you will hardly recognise it. All Thought escapes thus; you cannot keep it to yourself any more than you can have breath without breathing."

"You mean that a Thought belongs to all, and not to one individual?" said Irene.

"Yes, I mean that," replied El-Râmi; "and Thought, I may say, is the only reflex I can admit of possible Deity, because Thought is free, absolute, all-embracing, creative, perpetual, and unwearied. Limitless too—great Heaven, how limitless! To what heights does it not soar? In what depths does it not burrow? How daring, how calm, how indifferent to the ocean-swell of approaching and receding ages! Your modern Theosophist, calmly counting his gains from the blind incredulity and stupidity of the unthinking masses, is only copying, in a very Lilliputian manner, the grand sagacity and cunning of the ancient Egyptian 'magi,' who, by scientific trickery, ruled the ignorant multitude; it is the same Thought, only dressed in modern aspect. Thought,

and the proper condensation, controlling and usage of Thought, is Power,—Divinity, if you will. And it is the only existing Force that can make gods of men.”

Irene Vassilius sat silent, fascinated by his words, and still more fascinated by his manner. After a few minutes she spoke—

“I am glad you admit,” she said gently, “that this all-potent Thought may be a reflex of the Divine,—for we can have no reflections of light without the Light itself. I came to you in a somewhat discontented humour,—I am happier now. I suppose I ought to be satisfied with my lot,—I am certainly more fortunately situated than most women.”

“You are, Madame”—said El-Râmi, smiling pensively and fixing his dark eyes upon her with a kind expression,—“And your native good sense and wit will prevent you, I hope, from marring the good which the gods have provided for you. Do not marry yet,—it would be too great a disillusion for you. The smallest touch of prose is sufficient to destroy the delicacy of love’s finer sentiments; and marriage, as the married

will tell you, is all prose,—very prosy prose too. Avoid it!—prosy prose is tiresome reading.”

She laughed, and rose to take her leave.

“I saw your brother with Mr. Ainsworth yesterday,” she observed — “And I could not understand how two such opposite natures could possibly agree.”

“Oh, we did not agree,—we have not agreed,” said Féraz hastily, speaking for himself—“It is not likely we shall see much of each other.”

“I am glad to hear it”—and she extended her hand to him—“You are very young, and Roy Ainsworth is very old, not in years, but in heart. It would be a pity for you to catch the contagion of our modern pessimism.”

“But——” Féraz hesitated and stammered, “it was you, was it not, Madame, who suggested to Mr. Ainsworth that he should take me as the model for one of the figures in his picture?”

“Yes, it was I,” replied Irene with a slight smile—“But I never thought you would consent,—and I felt sure, that even if you did, he would never succeed in render-

ing your expression, for he is a mere surface-painter of flesh, not Soul—still, all the same, it amused me to make the suggestion.”

“Yes, — woman-like,” said El-Râmi—“You took pleasure in offering him a task he could not fulfil. There you have another reason why intellectual women are frequently detested—they ask so much and give so little.”

“You wrong us,” answered Irene swiftly. “When we love, we give all!”

“And so you give too much!” said El-Râmi gravely—“It is the common fault of women. You should never give ‘all’—you should always hold back something. To be fascinating, you should be enigmatical. When once man is allowed to understand your riddle thoroughly, the spell is broken. The placid, changeless, monotonously amiable woman has no power whatever over the masculine temperament. It is Cleopatra that makes a slave of Antony, not blameless and simple Octavia.”

Irene Vassilius smiled.

“According to such a theory, the Angels must be very tame and uninteresting individuals,” she said.

El-Râmi's eyes grew lustrous with the intensity of his thought.

"Ah, Madame, our conception of Angels is a very poor and false one, founded on the flabby imaginations of ignorant priests. An Angel, according to my idea, should be wild and bright and restless as lightning, speeding from star to star in search of new lives and new loves, with lips full of music and eyes full of fire, with every fibre of its immortal being palpitating with pure yet passionate desires for everything that can perfect and equalize its existence. The pallid, goose-winged object represented to us as inhabiting a country of No-Where without landscape or colour, playing on an unsatisfactory harp and singing 'Holy, holy' forever and ever, is no Angel, but rather a libel on the whole systematic creative plan of the Universe. Beauty, brilliancy, activity, glory and infinite variety of thought and disposition—if these be not in the composition of an Angel, then the Creator is but poorly served!"

"You speak as if you had seen one of these immortals?" said Irene, surprised.

A shadow darkened his features.

“Not I, Madame — except once — in a dream! You are going?—then farewell! Be happy,—and encourage the angelic qualities in yourself—for if there be a Paradise anywhere, you are on the path that leads to it.”

“You think so?” and she sighed—“I hope you may be right,—but sometimes I fear, and sometimes I doubt. Thank you for all you have said,—it is the first time I have met with so much gentleness, courtesy and patience from one of your sex. Good-bye!”

She passed out, Féraz escorting her to her carriage, which waited at the door; then he returned to his brother with a slow step and meditative air.

“Do men really wrong women so much as she seems to think?” he asked.

El-Râmi paused a moment,—then answered slowly :

“Yes, Féraz, they do; and as long as this world wags, they will! Let God look to it! —for the law of feminine oppression is His—not ours!”



CHAPTER X.

THAT same week was chronicled one of the worst gales that had ever been known to rage on the English coast. From all parts of the country came accounts of the havoc wrought on the budding fruit-trees by the pitiless wind and rain,—harrowing stories of floods and shipwrecks came with every fresh despatch of news,—great Atlantic steamers were reported “missing,” and many a fishing-smack went down in sight of land, with all the shrieking, struggling souls on board. For four days and four nights the terrific hurricane revelled in destruction, its wrath only giving way to occasional pauses of heavy silence more awful than its uproar ; and by the rocky shores of Ilfracombe, the scene of nature’s riot, confusion and terror

attained to a height of indescribable grandeur. The sea rose in precipitous mountain-masses, and anon wallowed in black abysmal chasms,—the clouds flew in a fierce rack overhead like the forms of huge witches astride on eagle-shaped monsters,—and with it all there was a close heat in the air, notwithstanding the tearing wind,—a heat and a sulphureous smell, suggestive of some pent-up hellish fire that but waited its opportunity to break forth and consume the land. On the third day of the gale particularly, this curious sense of suffocation was almost unbearable, and Dr. Kremlin, looking out of his high tower window in the morning at the unquiet sky and savage sea, wondered, as the wind scudded past, why it brought no freshness with it, but only an increased heat, like the “simoom” of the desert.

“It is one of those days on which it would seem that God is really angry,” mused Kremlin—“angry with Himself, and still more angry with His creature.”

The wind whistled and shrieked in his ears as though it strove to utter some wild response to his thought,—the sullen roaring

and battling of the waves on the beach below sounded like the clashing armour of contesting foes,—and the great Disc in the tower revolved, or appeared to revolve, more rapidly than its wont, its incessant whirr-whirring being always distinctly heard above the fury of the storm. To this, his great work, the chief labour of his life, Dr. Kremlin's eyes turned wistfully, as, after a brief observation of the turbulent weather, he shut his window fast against the sheeting rain. Its shining surface, polished as steel, reflected the lights and shadows of the flying storm-clouds, in strange and beautiful groups like moving landscapes—now and then it flashed with a curious lightning glare of brilliancy as it swung round to its appointed measure, even as a planet swings in its orbit. A new feature had been added to the generally weird effect of Kremlin's strange studio or workshop,—this was a heavy black curtain made of three thicknesses of cloth sewn closely together, and weighted at the end with bullet-shaped balls of lead. It was hung on a thick iron pole, and ran easily on indiarubber rings,—when drawn forward it covered the Disc

completely from the light without interfering with any portion of its mechanism. Three days since, Kremlin had received El-Râmi's letter telling him what the monk from Cyprus had said concerning the "Third Ray" or the messages from Mars, and eagerly grasping at the smallest chance of any clue to the labyrinth of the Light-vibrations, he had lost no time in making all the preparations necessary for this grand effort, this attempt to follow the track of the flashing signal whose meaning, though apparently unintelligible, might yet with patience be discovered. So, following the suggestions received, he had arranged the sable drapery, in such a manner that it could be drawn close across the Disc, or, in a second, be flung back to expose the whole surface of the crystal to the light,—all was ready for the trial, when the great storm came and interfered. Dense clouds covered the firmament,—and not for one single moment since he received the monk's message had Kremlin seen the stars. However, he was neither discouraged nor impatient,—he had not worked amid perplexities so long to be disheartened now by a mere tempest,

which in the ordinary course of nature, would wear itself out, and leave the heavens all the clearer both for reflection and observation. Yet he, as a meteorologist, was bound to confess that the fury of the gale was of an exceptional character, and that the height to which the sea lifted itself before stooping savagely towards the land and breaking itself in hissing spouts of spray, was stupendous, and in a manner appalling. Karl, his servant, was entirely horrified at the scene,—he hated the noise of the wind and waves, and more than all he hated the incessant melancholy scream of the seabirds that wheeled in flocks round and round the tower.

“It is for all the world like the shrieks of drowning men”—he said, and shivered, thinking of the pleasantly devious ways of the Rhine and its placid flowing,—placid even in flood, as compared to the howling ocean, all madness and movement and terror. Twice during that turbulent day Karl had asked his master whether the tower “shook.”

“Of course!” answered Dr. Kremlin with a smile in his mild eyes—“Of course it shakes,—it can hardly do otherwise in such

a gale. Even a cottage shakes in a fierce wind."

"Oh yes, a cottage shakes," said Karl meditatively—"but then if a cottage blows away altogether, it doesn't so much matter. Cottages are frequently blown away in America, so they say, with all the family sitting inside. That's not a bad way of travelling. But when a tower flies through the air, it seldom carries the family with it except in bits."

Kremlin laughed, but did not pursue the conversation, and Karl went about his duties in a gloomy humour, not common to his cheerful temperament. He really had enough to put him out, all things considered. Soot fell down the kitchen chimney—a huge brick also landed itself with a crash in the fender,—there were crevices in the doors and windows through which the wind played wailing sounds like a "coronach" on the bagpipes;—and then, when he went out into the courtyard to empty the pail of soot he had taken from the grate, he came suddenly face to face with an ugly bird, whose repulsive aspect

quite transfixed him for the moment and held him motionless, staring at it. It was a hooded vulture, and it stood huddled on the pavement, blinking its disagreeable eyes at Karl,—its floppy wings were drenched with the rain, and all over the yard was the wet trail of its feathers and feet.

“Shoo!” cried Karl, waving his arms and the pail of soot all together—“Shoo! Beast!”

But the vulture appeared not to mind—it merely set about preening its dirty wing.

Karl grew savage, and running back to the kitchen, brought shovel, tongs and a broom, all of which implements he flung in turn at the horrid-looking creature, which, finally startled, rose in air uttering dismal cries as it circled higher and higher, the while Karl watched its flight,—higher and higher it soared, till at last he ran out of the courtyard to see where it went. Round and round the house it flew, seeming to be literally tossed to and fro by the wind, its unpleasant shriek still echoing distinctly above the deep boom of the sea, till suddenly it made a short sweep downwards, and sat

on the top of the tower like a squat black phantom of the storm.

"Nasty brute!" said Karl, shaking his clenched fist at it—"If the Herr Doctor were like any other man, which he is not, he would have a gun in the house, and I'd shoot that vile screamer. Now it will sit cackling and yelling there all day and all night perhaps. Pleasant, certainly!"

And he went indoors, grumbling more than ever. Everything seemed to go wrong that day,—the fire wouldn't burn,—the kettle wouldn't boil,—and he felt inwardly vexed that his master was not as morose and irritable as himself. But, as it happened, Dr. Kremlin was in a singularly sweet and placid frame of mind,—the noise of the gale seemed to soothe rather than agitate his nerves. For one thing, he was much better in health, and looked years younger than when El-Râmi visited him, bringing the golden flask whose contents were guaranteed to give him a new lease of life. So far indeed the Elixir had done its work,—and to all appearances, he might have been a well-preserved man of about fifty, rather

than what he actually was, close upon his seventy-fourth year. As he could take no particularly interesting or useful observations from his Disc during the progress of the tempest, he amused himself with the task of perfecting one or two of his "Light-Maps" as he called them, and he kept at this work with the greatest assiduity and devotion all the morning. These maps were wonderfully interesting, if only for the extreme beauty, intricacy and regularity of the patterns,—one set of "vibrations" as copied from the reflections on the Disc, formed the exact shape of a branch of coral,—another gave the delicate outline of a frond of fern. All the lines ran in waves,—none of them were straight. Most of them were in small ripples,—others were larger—some again curved broadly, and turned round in a double twist, forming the figure 8 at long intervals of distance, but all resolved themselves into a definite pattern of some sort.

"Pictures in the sky!" he mused, as he patiently measured and re-touched the lines. "And all different!—not two of them alike! What do they all mean?—for they

must mean something. Nothing—not the lowest atom that exists, is without a meaning and a purpose. Shall I ever discover the solution to the Light-mystery, or is it so much God's secret that it will never become Man's?"

So he wondered, puzzling himself, with a good deal of pleasure in the puzzle. He was happy in his work, despite its strange and difficult character,—El-Râmi's elixir had so calmed and equalized his physical temperament, that he was no longer conscious of worry or perplexity. Satisfied that he had years of life before him in which to work, he was content to let things take their course, and he laboured on in the spirit that all labour claims, "without haste, without rest." Feverish hurry in work,—eagerness to get the rewards of it before conscientiously deserving them,—this disposition is a curse of the age we live in and the ruin of true art,—and it was this delirium of haste that had seized Kremlin when he had summoned El-Râmi to his aid. Now, haste seemed unnecessary ;—there was plenty of time, and—possessed of the slight clue to the "Third

Ray,"—plenty of hope as well, or so he thought.

In the afternoon the gale gradually abated, and sank to a curiously sudden dead calm. The sea still lifted toppling foam-crowned peaks to the sky, and still uttered shattering roars of indignation,—but there was a break in the clouds and a pale suggestion of sunshine. As the evening closed in, the strange dull quietness of the air deepened,—the black mists on the horizon flashed into stormy red for an instant when the sun set,—and then darkened again into an ominous greenish-gray. Karl, who was busy cooking his master's dinner, stopped stirring some sauce he was making, to listen, as it were, to the silence,—the only sound to be heard was the long roll and swish of the sea on the beach,—and even the scream of the gulls was stilled. Spoon in hand he went out in the yard to observe the weather; all movement in the heavens seemed to have been suddenly checked, and masses of black cloud rested where they were, apparently motionless. And while he looked up at the sky, he could hardly avoid taking the top of the tower also

into his view ;—there, to his intense disgust, still sate his enemy of the morning, the hooded vulture. Something that was not quite choice in the way of language escaped his lips as he saw the hateful thing ;—its presence was detestable to him and filled his mind with morbid imaginations which no amount of reasoning could chase away.

“ And yet what is it but a bird !” he argued with himself angrily, as he went indoors and resumed his cooking operations—“ A bird of prey, fond of carrion—nothing more. Why should I bother myself about it ? If I told the Herr Doctor that it was there, squatting at ease on his tower, he would very likely open the window, invite the brute in, and offer it food and shelter for the night. For he is one of those kind-hearted people who think that all the animal creation are worthy of consideration and tenderness. Well,—it may be very good and broad philosophy,—all the same, if I caught a rat sitting in my bed, I shouldn’t like it,—nor would I care to share my meals with a lively party of cock-roaches. There are limits to Christian feelings. And as for that beast of a bird outside,

why it's better outside than in, so I'll say nothing about it."

And he devoted himself more intently than ever to the preparation of the dinner,—for his master had now an excellent appetite, and ate good things with appreciation and relish, a circumstance which greatly consoled Karl for many other drawbacks in the service he had undertaken. For he was a perfect cook, and proud of his art, and that night he was particularly conscious of the excellence of the little tasty dishes he had, to use an art-term, "created," and he watched his master enjoy their flavour, with a proud, keen sense of his own consummate skill.

"When a man relishes his food it is all right with him," he thought. — "Starving for the sake of science may be all very well, but if it kills the scientist, what becomes of the science?"

And he grew quite cheerful in the contemplation of the "Herr Doctor's" improved appetite, and by degrees almost forgot the uncanny bird that was still sitting on the topmost ledge of the tower.

Among other studious habits engendered

by long solitude into which Kremlin had fallen, was the somewhat unhygienic one of reading at meals. Most frequently it was a volume of poems with which he beguiled the loneliness of his dinner, for he was one of those rare few who accept and believe in what may be called the "Prophecies" of Poesy. These are in very truth often miraculous, and it can be safely asserted that if the writers of the Bible had not been poets they would never have been prophets. A poet,—if he indeed *be* a poet, and not a mere manufacturer of elegant verse,—always raves,—raves madly, blindly, incoherently of things he does not really understand. Moreover, it is not himself that raves—but a Something within him,—some demoniac or angelic spirit that clamours its wants in wild music, which by throbbing measure and degree resolves itself, after some throes of pain on the poet's part, into a peculiar and occasionally vague language. The poet as man, is no more than man; but that palpitating voice in his mind gives him no rest, tears his thoughts piecemeal, rends his soul, and consumes him with feverish trouble and anxiety not his own, till

he has given it some sort of speech, however mystic and strange. If it resolves itself into a statement which appals or amazes, he, the poet, cannot help it; if it enunciates a prophecy he is equally incapable of altering or refuting it. When Shakespeare wrote the three words, "Sermons in stones," he had no idea that he was briefly expounding with perfect completeness the then to him unknown science of Geology. The poet is not born of Flesh alone, but of Spirit—a Spirit which dominates him whether he will or no, from the very first hour in which his childish eyes look inquiringly on leaves and flowers and stars—a Spirit which catches him by the hands, kisses him on the lips, whispers mad nothings in his startled ears, flies restlessly round and about him, brushing his every sense with downy, warm, hurrying wings,—snatches him up altogether at times and bids him sing, write, cry out strange oracles, weep forth wild lamentations, and all this without ever condescending to explain to him the reason why. It is left to the world to discover this "Why," and the discovery is often not made till ages after the poet's mortal

dust has been transformed to flowers in the grass which little children gather and wear unknowingly. The poet whose collected utterances Dr. Kremlin was now reading as he sipped the one glass of light Burgundy which concluded his meal, was Byron ; the fiery singer whose exquisite music is pooh-poohed by the insipid critics of the immediate day, who, jealous of his easily-won and world-wide fame, grudge him the laurel, even though it spring from the grave of a Hero as well as Bard. The book was open at "Manfred," and the lines on which old Kremlin's eyes rested were these :—

"How beautiful is all this visible world !
How glorious in its action and itself !
But we who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,
Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make
A conflict of its elements, and breathe
The breath of degradation and of pride,
Contending with low wants and lofty will,
Till our mortality predominates,
And men are,—what they name not to themselves,
And trust not to each other."

"Now that passage is every whit as fine as anything in Shakespeare," thought Kremlin — "and the whole secret of human trouble

is in it ;—it is not the world that is wrong, but we—we ‘who make a conflict of its elements.’ The question is, if we are really ‘unfit to sink or soar’ is it our fault?—and may we not ask without irreverence why we were made so incomplete? Ah, my clever friend El-Râmi Zarânos has set himself a super-human task on the subject of this ‘Why,’ and I fancy I shall find out the riddle of Mars and many another planet besides, before he ‘proves,’ as he is trying to do, the conscious and individual existence of the soul.”

He turned over the pages of “Manfred” thoughtfully, and then stopped, his gaze riveted on the splendid lines in which the unhappy hero of the tragedy flings his last defiance to the accusing demons—

“The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts—
Is its own origin of ill and end—
And its own place and time—its innate sense,
When stripped of this mortality, derives
No colour from the fleeting things without,
But is absorbed in sufferance or in joy,
Born from the knowledge of its own desert.
Thou did'st not tempt me, and thou could'st not tempt ;
I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey—

But was my own destroyer, and will be
My own hereafter.—Back, ye baffled fiends !
The hand of death is on me,—but not yours !”

“And yet people will say that Byron was an immoral writer!” murmured Kremlin—
“In spite of the tremendous lesson conveyed in those lines! There is something positively terrifying in that expression—

“‘But was my own destroyer, and will be
My own hereafter.’

What a black vista of possibilities——”

Here he broke off, suddenly startled by a snaky blue glare that flashed into the room like the swift sweep of a sword-blade. Springing up from the table, he rubbed his dazzled eyes.

“Why—what was that?” he exclaimed.

“Lightning!” replied Karl, just entering at the moment—“and a very nasty specimen of it. . . . I’d better put all the knives and steel things by.”

And he proceeded to do this, while Kremlin still stood in the centre of the room, his sight yet a little confused by the rapidity and brilliancy of that unexpected storm-flash. A

long low ominous muttering of thunder, beginning far off and rolling up nearer and nearer till it boomed like a volley of cannon in unison with the roar of the sea, followed,—then came silence. No rain fell, and the wind only blew moderately enough to sway the shrubs in front of the house lightly to and fro.

“It will be a stormy night,” said Dr. Kremlin then, recovering himself and taking up his Byron—“I am sorry for the sailors! You had better see well to all the fastenings of the doors and windows.”

“Trust me!” replied Karl sententiously—“You shall not be carried out to sea against your will if I can help it—nor have I any desire to make such a voyage myself. I hope, Herr Doctor”—he added with a touch of anxiety—“you are not going to spend this evening in the tower?”

“I certainly am!” answered Kremlin, smiling—“I have work up there, and I cannot afford to be idle on account of a thunderstorm. Why do you look so scared? There is no danger.”

“I didn’t say there was”—and Karl

fidgeted uneasily—"but—though I've never been inside it, I should think the tower was lonesome, and I should fancy there might be too close a view of the lightning to be quite pleasant."

Kremlin looked amused, and walking to the window, pushed back one of the curtains.

"I believe it was a false alarm," he said, gazing at the sea—"That flash and thunder-peal were the parting notes of a storm that has taken place somewhere else. See!—the clouds are clearing."

So in truth they were ; the evening, though very dark, seemed to give promise of a calm. One or two stars twinkled faintly in a blackish-blue breadth of sky, and perceiving these shining monitors and problems of his life's labour, Kremlin wasted no more time in words, but abruptly left the room and ascended to his solitary studio. Karl, listening, heard the closing of the heavy door aloft and the grating of the key as it turned in the lock,—and he also heard that strange perpetual whirring noise above, which, though he had in a manner grown accustomed to it, always remained for him a perplexing mystery.

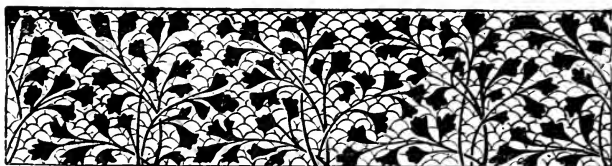
Shaking his head dolefully, and with a somewhat troubled countenance, he cleared the dining-table, set the room in order, went down to his kitchen, cleaned, rubbed, and polished everything till his surroundings were as bright as it was possible for them to be, and then, pleasantly fatigued, sat down to indite a letter to his mother in the most elaborate German phraseology he could devise. He was rather proud of his "learning," and he knew his letters home were read by nearly all the people in his native village as well as by his maternal parent, so that he was particularly careful in his efforts to impress everybody by the exceeding choiceness of his epistolary "style." Absorbed in his task, he at first scarcely noticed the gradual rising of the wind, which, having rested for a few hours, now seemed to have awakened in redoubled strength and fury. Whistling under the kitchen-door it came, with a cold and creepy chill,—it shook the windows angrily, and then, finding the door of the outside pantry open, shut it to with a tremendous bang, like an irate person worsted in an argument. Karl paused, pen in hand ;

and as he did so, a dismal cry echoed round the house, the sound seeming to fall from a height and then sweep over the earth with the wind, towards the sea.

“It’s that brute of a bird!” said Karl half-aloud—“Nice cheerful voice he has, to be sure!”

At that moment, the kitchen was illuminated from end to end by a wide blue glare of lightning, followed, after a heavy pause, by a short loud clap of thunder. The hovering storm had at last gathered together its scattered forces, and concentrating itself blackly above the clamorous sea, now broke forth in deadly earnest.





CHAPTER XI.

KREMLIN meanwhile had reached his tower in time to secure a glimpse of the clearer portion of the sky before it clouded over again. Opening the great window, he leaned out and anxiously surveyed the heavens. There was a little glitter of star-groups above his head, and immediately opposite an almost stirless heavy fleece of blackness, which he knew by its position hid from his sight the planet Mars, the brilliant world he now sought to make the chief centre of his observations. He saw that heavy clouds were slowly rolling up from the south, and he was quite prepared for a fresh outbreak of storm and rain, but he was determined to take advantage, if possible, of even a few moments of temporary calm. And with this

intention he fixed his gaze watchfully on the woolly-looking dark mass of vapour that concealed the desired Star from his view, having first carefully covered the steadily revolving Disc with its thick sable curtain. Never surely was there a more weird and solemn-looking place than the tower-room as it now appeared ; no light in it at all save a fitful side-gleam from the whirling edge of the Disc,—all darkness and monotonous deep sound, with that patient solitary figure leaning at the sill of the wide-open window, gazing far upward at the pallid gleam of those few distant stars that truly did no more than make “darkness visible.” The aged scientist’s heart beat quickly ; the weight of long years of labour and anxiety seemed to be lifted from his spirit, and it was with almost all the ardour of his young student-days that he noted the gradual slow untwisting and dividing of those threads of storm-mist, that like a dark web, woven by the Fates, veiled the “red Planet” whose flashing Signal might prove to be the key to a thousand hitherto unexplored mysteries. It was strange that just at this particular

moment of vague suspense his thoughts should go wandering in a desultory wilful fashion back to this past,—and that the history of his bygone life seemed to arrange itself, as it were, in a pattern as definite as the wavy lines on his “Light-Maps” and with just as *indefinite* a meaning. He, who had lived that life, was as perplexed concerning its ultimate intention, as he was concerning the ultimate meanings conveyed by the light-vibrations through air. He tried to keep his ideas centred on the scientific puzzle he was attempting to unravel,—he strove to think of every small fact that bore more or less on that one central object,—he repeated to himself the A B C of his art, concerning the vibrations of light on that first natural reflector, the human eye,—how, in receiving the impression of the colour red, for instance, the nerves of the eye are set quivering *four hundred and eighty-two millions of millions of times*; or, of the colour violet, seven hundred and seven millions of millions of times *per second*. How could he hope to catch the rapid flash of the “Third Ray” under these tremendous con-

ditions? Would it not vanish from the very face of the Disc before he had time to track its circuit? But though he strove to busy his brain with conjectures and calculations, he was forced, in spite of himself, to go on groping into the Past; that wonderful Past when he had been really young—young with a youth not born of El-Râmi's secret concoctions,—but youth as it is received fresh and perfect from the hand of Divinity—the talisman which makes all the world an Eden of roses without thorns. He saw himself as he used to be, a slim student, fair-haired and blue-eyed, absorbed in science, trying strange experiments, testing new chemical combinations, ferreting out the curious mysteries of atmospheric phenomena, and then being gradually led to consider the vast amount of *apparently unnecessary* Light *per second*, that pours upon us from every radiating object in the firmament, bearing in mind the fact that our Earth itself radiates through Space, even though its glimmer be no more than that of a spark amid many huge fires. He remembered how he had pored over the

strange but incontestable fact that two rays of light starting from the same point and travelling in the same direction frequently combine to produce darkness, by that principle which is known in the science of Optics as the *interference* of the rays of light,—and how, in the midst of all this, his work had been suddenly interrupted and put a stop to by a power the stars in their courses cannot gainsay—Love. Yes—he had loved and been beloved,—this poor, gentle, dreamy man ;—one winter in Russia—one winter when the snows lay deep on the wild steppes and the wolves were howling for hunger in the gloom of the forests,—he had dreamed his dream, and wakened from it—broken-hearted. She whom he loved, a beautiful girl connected with the Russian nobility, was associated, though he knew it not, with a secret society of Nihilists, and was all at once arrested with several others and accused of being party to a plot for the assassination of the Tsar. Found guilty, she was sentenced to exile in Siberia, but before the mandate could be carried out, she died by her own hand, poisoned in her prison

cell. Kremlin, though not "suspect," went almost mad with grief, and fled from Russia never to set his foot on its accursèd soil again. People said that the excess of his sorrow, rage and despair had affected his brain, which was possible, as his manner and mode of living, and the peculiar grooves of study into which he fell, were undoubtedly strange and eccentric—and yet—tenderness for his dead love, self-murdered in her youth and beauty, kept him sensitively alive to human needs and human suffering,—there was no scorn or bitterness in his nature, and his faith in the unseen God was as great as El-Râmi's doubt. But left as he was all alone in the world, he plunged into the obscure depths of science with greater zest than ever, striving to forget the dire agony of that brief love-drama, the fatal end of which had nearly closed his own career in madness and death. And so the years drifted on and on in work that every day grew more abstruse and perplexing, till he had suddenly, as it were, found himself old,—too old, as he told himself with nervous trembling, ever to complete what he had

begun. Then he had sent for El-Râmi; El-Râmi whom he had met and wondered at, during his travels in the East years ago . . . and El-Râmi, at his desire, by strange yet potent skill, had actually turned back time in its too rapid flight—and a new lease of life was vouchsafed to him;—he had leisure,—long, peaceful leisure in which to carry out his problems to perfection, if to carry them out were at all possible. For had not El-Râmi said—“You cannot die, except by violence”?

And thus, like the “star-patterns,” all the fragments of his personal history came into his mind to-night as he waited at his tower window, watching the black pavilion under which the world of Mars swung round in its fiery orbit.

“Why do I think of all these bygone things just now?” he asked himself wonderingly—“I who so seldom waste my time in looking back, my work being all for the Future?”

As he murmured the words half aloud, a rift showed itself in the cloud he was observing,—a rift which widened gradually and

broke up the dark mass by swift and ever swifter degrees. Fold after fold of mist dissolved and dispersed itself along the sky, swept by the wings of the newly-arisen wind, and Mars, angrily crimson and stormily brilliant, flashed forth a lurid fire. . . . In less time than imagination can depict, Kremlin had noiselessly flung the black curtain back from his Disc, . . . and with his eyes riveted upon its gleaming pearly surface he waited . . . scarcely breathing, . . . every nerve in his body seeming to contract and grow rigid with expectation and something like dread. A pale light glistened on the huge Disc . . . it was gone! . . . another flash, . . . and this remained trembling in wavy lines and small revolving specks—now . . . now . . . the Third!—and Kremlin craned his head forward eagerly . . . it came!—like a drop of human blood it fell, and raced more rapidly than quicksilver round and round the polished surface of the Disc, paling in tint among the other innumerable silvery lines . . . flashed again redly . . . and . . . disappeared! A cry of irrepressible disappointment broke from Kremlin's lips.

“Impossible! . . . my God! . . . impossible!”

Aye!—impossible surely to track such velocity of motion—impossible to fix the spot where first its dazzling blood-like hue fell, and where it at last vanished. And yet Kremlin waited on in feverish expectancy,—his lips apart, his breath coming and going in quick uneasy gasps, his straining eyes fixed on that terrible, inscrutable creation of his own skill, that fearful Mirror of the heavens which reflected so much and betrayed so little! . . . Heedless of the muttering roar of the wind which now suddenly assailed the tower, he stood, fascinated by the dazzling play of light that illumined the Disc more brilliantly than usual. A dismal scream,—the cry of the vulture perched on the roof above him, echoed faintly in his ears, but he scarcely heard it, so absorbed was he in his monstrous Enigma; till—all at once, a blue shaft of lightning glared in at the window, its brief reflection transforming the Disc for a second to an almost overwhelming splendour of glittering colour. The strong blaze dazzled Kremlin’s eyes,—and as the answer-

ing thunder rattled through the sky, he reluctantly moved from his position and went towards the window to shut it against the threatening storm. But when he reached it, he saw that the planet Mars was yet distinctly visible; the lightning and thunder came from that huge bank of clouds in the south he had before noticed,—clouds which were flying rapidly up, but had not yet entirely obscured the heavens. In eager and trembling haste he hurried back to the Disc,—it seemed alive with light, and glistened from point to point like a huge jewel as it whirled and hummed its strange monotonous music,—and, shading his eyes, he remained close beside it, determined to watch it still, hoping against hope that another red flash like the one he had lately seen, might crimson the quivering mass of silvery intersecting lines which he knew were not so much the light-vibrations of stars now, as reflexes of the electricity pent up in the tempestuous atmosphere.

“Patience . . . patience!” he murmured aloud—“A moment more, and perhaps I shall see, . . . I shall know . . . I shall find what I have sought. . . .”

The last words were yet trembling on his lips when a fearful forked tongue of red flame leaped from the clouds, descending obliquely like a colossal sword, . . . it smote the tower, splitting its arched roof and rending its walls asunder,—and with the frightful boom and bellow of thunder that followed, echoing over land and sea for miles and miles there came another sound, . . . a clanging jangle of chains and wires and ponderous metals, . . . the mighty mass of the glittering Star-Dial swirled round unsteadily once . . . twice . . . quivered . . . stopped . . . and then . . . slipping from its wondrous pendulum, hurled itself forward like a monster shield and fell! . . . fell with an appalling crash and thud, bringing the roof down upon itself in a blinding shower of stones and dust and mortar. . . . And then . . . why, then nothing! Nothing but dense blackness, muttering thunder, and the roaring of the wind.

Outside, frantic with fear, Karl shook and battered at the firmly-locked and bolted door of the tower. When that forked flash of

lightning had struck the house, it had stretched him senseless in his kitchen,—he had however recovered after a few minutes' unconsciousness, dazed and stunned but otherwise unhurt, and becoming gradually alive to the immediate dangers of the situation, he had, notwithstanding the fury of the gale and the deafening peals of thunder, rushed out of doors instinctively to look at the tower. One glance showed him what had happened,—it was split asunder, and showed dimly against the stormy night like a yawning ruin round which in time the ivy might twist and cling. Breathless and mad with terror, he had rushed back to the house and up the stairs, and now stood impatiently clamouring outside the impenetrable portal whose firm interior fastenings resisted all his efforts. He called, he knocked, he kicked,—and then, exhausted with the vain attempt, stopped to listen. . . . Nothing! . . . not a sound! He made a hollow of his hands and put his mouth to the keyhole.

“Herr Doctor! . . . Herr Doctor!”

No answer,—except the stormy whistle of the blast.

“No help for it!” he thought desperately, tears of excitement and alarm gathering in his eyes—“I must call for assistance,—rouse the neighbours and break open the door by force.”

He ran downstairs and out of the house bareheaded, to be met by a sudden sweep of rain which fell in a straight unpremeditated way from the clouds in stinging torrents. Heedless of wind and wet he sped along, making direct for some fishermen's cottages whose inhabitants he knew and whom in a manner he was friendly with, and having roused them up by shouts and cries, explained to them as briefly as possible what had happened. As soon as they understood the situation four stout fellows got ready to accompany him, and taking pickaxes, crow-bars, boathooks, and any other such implements as were handy, they ran almost as quickly as Karl himself to the scene of the catastrophe. Their excitement was to the full as great as his, till they reached the top of the staircase and stood outside the mysterious door—there they hung back a moment hesitatingly.

“Call him again”—one whispered to Karl. “Mebbe he’s in there safe and sound and did not hear ye at fust.”

To satisfy the man’s scruples Karl obeyed, and called and called, and knocked and knocked again and yet again,—with the same result,—no answer, save the derisive yell of the gale.

“He be dead an’ gone for sure”—said a second man, with a slight pallor coming over his sea-tanned face—“Well . . . well ! . . . if so be as we *must* break down th’ door——”

“Here, give me one of those things”—cried Karl impatiently, and snatching a crow-bar he began dealing heavy blows at the massive nail-studded oaken barrier. Seeing him so much in earnest, his companions lost the touch of superstitious dread that had made them hesitate, and also set themselves to work with a will, and in a few minutes—minutes which to the anxious Karl seemed ages,—the door was battered in, . . . and they all rushed forward, . . . but the fierce wind tearing wildly around them, caught the flame of the lamp they carried and extinguished it, so that they were left in total

darkness. But over their heads the split roof yawned, showing the black sky, and about their feet there was a mass of fallen stones and dust and indistinguishable ruin. As quickly as possible they re-lit the lamp and holding it aloft, looked tremblingly and without speaking a word, at the havoc and confusion around them. At first little could be seen but heaped-up stones and bricks and mortar, but Karl's quick eyes roving eagerly about caught sight suddenly of something black under a heap of *débris*,—and quickly bending down over it he began with his hands to clear away the rubbish,—the other men, seeing what he was trying to do, aided him in his task, and in about twenty minutes' time they succeeded in uncovering a black mass, huge and inanimate.

“What is it?” whispered one of the men—
“It's . . . it's not him?”

Karl said nothing—he felt himself turning sick with dread, . . . he touched that doubtful blackness—it was a thick cloth like a great pall—it concealed . . . what? Recklessly he pulled and tugged at it, getting his

hands lacerated by a tangled mesh of wires and metals,—till, yielding at last to a strong jerk, it came away in weighty clinging folds, disclosing what to him seemed an enormous round stone, which, as the lamp-light flashed upon it, glistened mysteriously with a thousand curious hues. Karl grasped its edge in an effort to lift it—his fingers came in contact with something moist and warm, and snatching them away in a sort of vague horror, he saw that they were stained with blood.

“Oh my God! my God!” he cried—“He is down there,—underneath this thing! . . . help me to lift it, men!—lift it for Heaven’s sake!—lift it, quick—quick!”

But though they all dragged at it with a will, the work was not so easy—the great Disc had fallen flat, and lay solemnly inert—and that oozing blood,—the blood of the too daring student of the stars who had designed its mystic proportions,—trickled from under it with sickening rapidity. At last, breathless and weary, they were about to give up the task in despair, when Karl snatched from out

the ruins the iron needle or pendulum on which the Disc had originally swung, and all unknowing what it was, thrust it cautiously under the body of the great stone to aid in getting a firmer hold of it, . . . to his amazement and terror the huge round mass caught and clung to it, like warm sealing wax to a piece of paper, and in an instant seemed to have magically dispensed with all its weight, for as, with his unassisted strength he lifted the pendulum, the Disc lifted itself lightly and easily with it! A cry of fear and wonder broke from all the men,—Karl himself trembled in every limb, and big drops of cold sweat broke out on his forehead at what he deemed the devilish horror of this miracle. But as he, with no more difficulty than he would have experienced in heaving up a moderate-sized log of wood, raised the Disc and flung it back and away from him shudderingly, pendulum and all, his eyes fell on *what* had lain beneath it, . . . a crushed pulp of human flesh and streaming blood—and reverend silver hairs . . . and with a groan that seemed to rend his very heart, Karl

gave one upward sick stare at the reeling sky, and fainted, . . . as unconscious for the time being as that indistinguishable mangled mass of perished mortality that once had been his master.

Gently and with compassionate kindness, the rough fishers who stood by lifted him up and bore him out of the tower and down the stairs,—and after a whispered consultation, carried him away from the house altogether to one of their own cottages, where they put him under the care of one of their own women. None of them could sleep any more that night; they stood in a group close by their humble habitations, watching the progress of the storm, and ever and anon casting awe-stricken glances at the shattered tower.

“The devil was in it”—said one of the men at last, as he lit his pipe and endeavoured to soothe his nerves by several puffs at that smoky consoler—“or else how would it rise up like that as light as a feather at the touch of an iron pole?”

"It must a' weighed twenty stuns at least"—murmured another man meditatively.

"What *was* it?" demanded a third—"I should a' took it for a big grindstone if it hadn't sparkled up so when the light fell on it."

"Well, it may stay where it is for all I care," said the first speaker—"I wouldn't touch it again for a hundred pound!"

"Nor I." "Nor I."

They were all agreed on that point.

"Wotever he were a' doin' on,"—said the fourth man gravely—"whether it were God's work or the devil's, it's all over now. He's done for, poor old chap—mashed into a reg'lar jelly—wiped out as it were. It's an awful end—God rest his soul!"

The others lifted their caps and murmured "Amen" with simple reverence. Then they looked out at the dark wallowing trough of the sea.

"How the wind roars!" said the last speaker.

"Ay, it do roar," replied the man who was his mate in the boat when they went fishing ;

“and did ye hear a vulture scream awhile ago?”

“Ay, ay! I heard it!” They were silent then, and turned in, after making inquiries concerning Karl at the cottage where they had left him. He was still unconscious.





CHAPTER XII.

A COUPLE of days later, El-Râmi was engaged in what was not a very favourite occupation with him,—he was reading the morning's newspaper. He glanced over the cut-and-dry chronicle of "Storms and Floods"—he noted that a great deal of damage had been wrought by the gale at Ilfracombe and other places along the Devonshire coast,—but there was nothing of any specially dreadful import to attract his attention, and nothing either in politics or science of any pressing or vital interest. There were two or three reviews of books, one of these being pressed into a corner next to the advertisement of a patent pill; there were announcements of the movements of certain human units favoured with a little extra money and

position than ordinary, as being "in" or "out" of town, and there was a loftily-patronizing paragraph on the "Theosophical Movement," or as it is more frequently termed, the "Theosophical Boom." From this, El-Râmi learned that a gentleman connected with the Press, who wrote excessively common-place verse, and thereby had got himself and his name (through the aforesaid press-connection) fairly well known, had been good enough to enunciate the following amazing platitude;—"That, as a great portion of the globe is composed of elements which cannot be seen, and as the study of the invisible may be deemed as legitimate as the study of the visible, he" (the press-connected versifier) "is inclined to admit that there are great possibilities on the lines of that study."

"Inclined to admit it, is he!" and El-Râmi threw aside the paper and broke into a laugh of the sincerest enjoyment—"Heavens! what fools there are in this world, who call themselves wise men! This little poetaster, full of the conceit common to his imitative craft, is 'inclined to admit' that

there are great possibilities in the study of the invisible! Excellent condescension! How the methods of life have turned topsy-turvy since the ancient days! Then the study of the Invisible was the first key to the study of the Visible,—the things which are seen being considered only as the reflexes of the things which are unseen—the Unseen being accepted as Cause, the Seen as Effect. Now we all drift the other way,—taking the Visible as Fact,—the Invisible as Fancy!"

Féraz, who was writing at a side-table, looked up at him.

"Surely you are inconsistent?" he said—"You yourself believe in nothing unless it is *proved*."

"But then, my dear fellow, I *can* prove the Invisible and follow the grades of it, and the modes by which it makes itself the Visible,—to a certain extent—but only to a certain extent. Beyond the provable limit I do not go. You, on the contrary, aided by the wings of imagination, outsoar that limit, and profess to find angels, star-kingdoms, and God Himself. I cannot go so far as this.

But, unlike our blown-out frog of a versifier here, who would fain persuade mankind he is a bull, I am not only 'inclined' to admit—I *do* admit that there are 'great possibilities'—only I must test them all before I can accept them as facts made clear to my comprehension."

"Still, you believe in the Invisible?"

"Naturally. I believe in the millions of suns in the Milky Way, though they can scarcely be called 'visible.' I should be a fool if I did not believe in the Invisible, under the present conditions of the Universe. But I cannot be tricked by 'shams' of the Invisible. The Theosophical business is a piece of vulgar imposture, in which the professors themselves are willing to delude their own imaginations, as well as the imaginations of others—they are the most wretched imitators that ever were of the old Eastern sorcerers,—the fellows who taught Moses and Aaron how to frighten their ignorant cattle-like herds of followers. None of the modern 'mediums' as they are called, have the skill over atmospheric phenomena, metals and light-reflexes, that Apollonius of Tyana had, or Alexander the

Paphlagonian. Both these scientific sorcerers were born about the same time as Christ, and Apollonius like Christ, raised a maiden from the dead. Miracles were the fashion in that period of time,—and according to the monotonous manner in which history repeats itself, they are coming into favour again in this century. All that we know now has been already known. The ancient Greeks had their ‘penny-in-the-slot’ machine for the purpose of scattering perfume on their clothes as they passed along the streets—they had their ‘syphon’ bottles and vases as we have, and they had their automatically opening and closing doors. Compare the miserable ‘spiritualistic phenomena’ of the Theosophists with the marvels wrought by Hakem, known as Mokanna! Mokanna could cause an orb like the moon to rise from a well at a certain hour and illumine the country for miles and miles around. How did he do it? By a knowledge of electric force applied to air and water. The ‘bogies’ of a modern ‘séance’ who talk bad grammar and pinch people’s toes and fingers, are very coarse examples of necromancy, compared to the

scientific skill of Mokanna and others of this tribe. However, superstition is the same in all ages, and there will always be fools ready to believe in 'Mahatmas' or anything else,—and the old 'incantation of the Mantra,' will, if well done, influence the minds of the dupes of the nineteenth century quite as effectively as it did those of the bygone ages before Christ."

"What is the incantation of the Mantra?" asked Feraz.

"A ridiculous trick"—replied El-Râmi—"known to every Eastern conjurer and old woman who professes to see the future. You take your dupe, and fling a little water over him, fixing upon him your eyes and all the force of your will,—then, you take a certain mixture of chemical substances and perfumes, and set them on fire—the flames and fumes produce a dazzling and drowsy effect on the senses of your 'subject,' who will see whatever you choose him to see, and hear whatever you intend him to hear. But Will is the chief ingredient of the spell,—and if I, for example, choose to influence anyone, I can dispense with both water and fire—I can

do it alone and without any show of preparation."

"I know you can!" said Féraz meaningly, with a slight smile, and then was silent.

"I wonder what the art of criticism is coming to now-a-days!" exclaimed El-Râmi presently, taking up the paper again—"Here is a remark worthy of Dogberry's profundity—'*This is a book that must be read to be understood.*'"* Why, naturally! Who can understand a book without reading it?"

Féraz laughed—then his eyes darkened.

"I saw an infamous so-called critique of one of Madame Vassilius's books the other day"—he said—"I should like to have thrashed the man who wrote it. It was not criticism at all—it was a mere piece of scurrilous vulgarity."

"Ah, but that sort of thing pays!" retorted El-Râmi satirically. "The modern journalist attains his extremest height of brilliancy when he throws the refuse of his inkpot at the name and fame of a woman more gifted than himself. It's nineteenth-century chivalry you know,—above all . . . it's manly!"

* Copied verbatim from the current Press.

Féraz shrugged his shoulders with a faint gesture of contempt.

"Then—if there is any truth in old chronicles—men are not what they were ;"—he said.

"No—they are not what they were, my dear boy—because all things have changed. Women were once the real slaves and drudges of men,—now, they are very nearly their equals, or can be so if they choose. And men have to get accustomed to this—at present they are in the transition state and don't like it. Besides, there will always be male tyrants and female drudges as long as the world lasts. Men are not what they were,—and, certes, they are not what they might be."

"They might be gods ;"—said Féraz—"but I suppose they prefer to be devils."

"Precisely !" agreed El - Râmi — "it is easier, and more amusing."

Féraz resumed his writing in silence. He was thinking of Irene Vassilius, whom he admired ;—and also of that wondrous Sleeping Beauty enshrined upstairs whose loveliness he did not dare to speak of. He had latterly

noticed a great change in his brother,—an indefinable softness seemed to have imperceptibly toned down the habitual cynicism of his speech and manner,—his very expression of countenance was more gracious and benign,—he looked handsomer,—his black eyes shot forth a less fierce fire,—and yet, with all his gentleness and entire lack of impatience, he was absorbed from morning to night in such close and secret study as made Féraz sometimes fear for its ultimate result on his health.

“Do you really believe in prayer, Féraz?” was the very unexpected question he now asked, with sudden and startling abruptness; “I mean, do you think anyone in the Invisible Realms *hears* us when we pray?”

Féraz laid down his pen, and gazed at his brother for a moment without answering. Then he said slowly—

“Well, according to your own theories the Air is a vast Phonograph,—so it follows naturally that everything is *heard* and *kept*. But as to prayer, that depends I think, altogether on how you pray. I do not believe in it at all times. And I’m afraid my ideas

on the subject are quite out of keeping with those generally accepted——”

“Never mind—let me have them, whatever they are”—interrupted El-Râmi with visible eagerness—“I want to know when and how you pray?”

“Well, the fact is I very seldom pray”—returned Férâz—“I offer up the best praise I can in mortal language devise, both night and morning—but I never *ask* for anything. It would seem so vile to ask for more, having already so much. And I am sure God knows best—in which case I have nothing to ask, except one thing.”

“And that is——?” queried his brother.

“Punishment!” replied Férâz emphatically; “I pray for that—I crave for that—I implore that I may be punished at once when I have done wrong, that I may immediately recognise my error. I would rather be punished here, than hereafter.”

El-Râmi paled a little, and his lips trembled.

“Strange boy!” he murmured—“All the churches are praying God to take away the punishments incurred for sin,—you on the contrary, ask for it as if it were a blessing.”

“So it is a blessing”—declared Féraz—
“It must be a blessing—and it is absurd of the churches to pray against a Law. For it is a Law. Nature punishes us, when we physically rebel against the rules of health, by physical suffering and discomfort,—God punishes us in our mental rebellions by mental wretchedness. This is as it should be. I believe we get everything in this world that we deserve—no more and no less.”

“And do you never pray”—continued El-Râmi slowly, “for the accomplished perfection of some cherished aim,—the winning of some special joy——”

“Not I”—said Féraz—“because I know that if it be good for me I shall have it,—if bad, it will be withheld; all my prayers could not alter the matter.”

El-Râmi sat silent for a few minutes,—then, rising, he took two or three turns up and down the room, and gradually a smile, half scornful, half sweet, illumined his dark features.

“Then, O young and serene philosopher, I will not pray!” he said, his eyes flashing a

lustrous defiance—"I have a special aim in view—I mean to grasp a joy!—and whether it be good or bad for me, I will attempt it unassisted."

"If it be good you will succeed;"—said Féraz with a glance expressive of some fear as well as wonderment. "If it be bad, you will not. God arranges these things for us."

"God—God—always God!" cried El-Râmi with some impatience—"No God shall interfere with me!" At that moment there came a hesitating knock at the street-door. Féraz went to open it, and admitted a pale grief-stricken man whose eyes were red and heavy with tears and whose voice utterly failed him to reply when El-Râmi exclaimed in astonishment:

"Karl! . . . Karl! You here? Why, what has happened?"

Poor Karl made a heroic struggle to speak,—but his emotion was too strong for him—he remained silent, and two great drops rolled down his cheeks in spite of all his efforts to restrain them.

"You are ill;"—said Féraz kindly, pushing him by gentle force into a chair and fetching

him a glass of wine—"Here, drink this—it will restore you."

Karl put the glass aside tremblingly, and tried to smile his gratitude,—and presently gaining a little control over himself he turned his piteous glances towards El-Râmi whose fine features had become suddenly grave and fixed in thought.

"You . . . you . . . have not heard, sir——" he stammered.

El-Râmi raised his hand gently, with a solemn and compassionate gesture.

"Peace, my good fellow!—no, I have not heard,—but I can guess;—Kremlin, . . . your master . . . is dead."

And he was silent for many minutes. Fresh tears trickled from Karl's eyes, and he made a pretence of tasting the wine that Féraz pressed upon him—Féraz, who looked as statuesque and serene as a young Apollo.

"You must console yourself;"—he said cheerfully to Karl,—“Poor Dr. Kremlin had many troubles and few joys—now he has gone where he has no trouble and all joy.”

“Ah!” sighed Karl dolefully—“I wish I

could believe that, sir,—I wish I could believe it! But it was the judgment of God upon him—it was indeed!—that is what my poor mother would say,—the judgment of God!”

El-Râmi moved from his meditative attitude with a faint sense of irritation. The words he had so lately uttered—“No God shall interfere with me”—re-echoed in his mind. And now here was this man,—this servant, weeping and trembling and talking of the “judgment of God” as if it were really something divinely directed and inexorable.

“What do you mean?” he asked, endeavouring to suppress the impatience in his voice—“Of course, I know he must have had some violent end, or else he could not”—and he repeated the words impressively—“could not have died,—but was there anything more than usually strange in the manner of his death?”

Karl threw up his hands.

“More than usually strange! Ach, Gott!” and, with many interpolations of despair and expressions of horror, he related in broken

accents the whole of the appalling circumstances attending his master's end. In spite of himself a faint shudder ran through El-Râmi's warm blood as he heard—he could almost see before him the horrible spectacle of the old man's mangled form lying crushed under the ponderous Disc his daring skill had designed; and under his breath he murmured—"Oh Lilith, oh my too-happy Lilith! and yet you tell me there is no death!" Féraz however, the young and sensitive Féraz, listened to the sad recital with quiet interest, unhorrorified, apparently unmoved,—his eyes were bright, his expression placid.

"He could not have suffered;"—he observed at last, when Karl had finished speaking—"The flash of lightning must have severed body and spirit instantly and without pain. I think it was a good end."

Karl looked at the beautiful smiling youth in vague horror. What!—to be flattened out like a board beneath a ponderous weight of fallen stone—to be so disfigured as to be unrecognisable—to have one's mortal remains actually *swept up and wiped out* (as had been

the case with poor Kremlin), and to be only a mangled mass of flesh difficult of decent burial,—and call that “a good end”! Karl shuddered and groaned;—he was not versed in the strange philosophies of young Féraz—he had never been out of his body on an ethereal journey to the star-kingdoms.

“It was the judgment of God,”—he repeated dully—“Neither more nor less. My poor master studied too hard, and tried to find out too much, and I think he made God angry——”

“My good fellow,” interrupted El-Râmi rather irritably—“do not talk of what you do not understand. You have been faithful, hard-working and all the rest of it,—but as for your master trying to find out too much, or God getting angry with him, that is all nonsense. We were placed on this earth to find out as much as we can, about it and about ourselves, and do the best that is possible with our learning,—and the bare idea of a great God condescending to be ‘angry’ with one out of millions upon millions of units is absurd——”

“But even if an unit rebels against the

Law the Law crushes him " — interrupted Féraz softly—" A gnat flies into flame—the flame consumes it—the Law is fulfilled,—and the Law is God's Will."

El-Râmi bit his lip vexedly.

"Well, be that as it may one must needs find out what the Law *is* first, before it can either be accepted, or opposed," he said.

Féraz made no answer. He was thinking of the simplicity of certain Laws of Spirit and Matter which were accepted and agreed to by the community of men of whom the monk from Cyprus was the chief master.

Karl meanwhile stared bewilderedly from Féraz to El-Râmi and from El-Râmi back to Féraz again. Their remarks were totally beyond his comprehension ; he never could understand, and never wanted to understand these subtle philosophies.

" I came to ask you, sir "—he said after a pause—" whether you would not, now you know all, manage to take away that devilish thing that killed my master ? I'm afraid to touch it myself, and no one else will—and there it lies up in the ruined tower shining away like a big lamp, and sticking like a burr

to the iron rod I lifted it with. If it's any good to you, I'm sure you'd better have it—and by-the-bye, I found this, sir, in my master's room addressed to you."

He held out a sealed envelope, which El-Râmi opened. It contained a folded paper, on which were scratched these lines—

"TO EL-RÂMI ZARÂNOS.

"Good friend, in the event of my death, I beg you to accept all my possessions such as they are, and do me the one favour I ask, which is this—Destroy the Disc, and let my problem die with me."

This paper duly signed, bore the date of two years previously. El-Râmi read it, and handed it to Karl who read it also. They were silent for a few minutes; then El-Râmi crossed the room, and unlocking a small cupboard in the wall, took out a sealed flask full of what looked like red wine.

"See here, Karl"—he said;—"There is no devil in the great stone you are so afraid of. It is as perishable as anything else in this best of all possible worlds. It is nothing

but a peculiar and rare growth of crystal, which though found in the lowest depths of the earth, has the quality of absorbing light and emitting it. It clings to the iron rod in the way you speak of because it is a magnet,—and iron not only attracts but fastens it. It is impossible for me just now to go to Ilfracombe—besides there is really no necessity for my presence there. I can fully trust you to bring me the papers and few possessions of my poor old friend,—and for the rest, you can destroy the stone yourself—the Disc, as your master called it. All you have to do is simply to pour this liquid on it,—it will pulverize—that is, it will crumble into dust while you watch it, and in ten minutes will be indistinguishable from the fallen mortar of the shattered tower. Do you understand?”

Karl's mouth opened a little in wonderment, and he nodded feebly,—he found it quite easy and natural to be afraid of the flask containing a mixture of such potent quality, and he took it from El-Râmi's hand very gingerly and reluctantly. A slight smile crossed El-Râmi's features as he said—

"No, Karl! there is no danger—no fear of pulverization for *you*. You can put the phial safely in your pocket,—and though its contents could pulverize a mountain if used in sufficient quantities,—the liquid has no effect on flesh and blood."

"Pulverize a mountain!" repeated Karl nervously—"Do you mean that it could turn a mountain into a dust-heap?"

"Or a city—or a fortress—or a rock-bound coast—or anything in the shape of stone that you please"—replied El-Râmi carelessly—"but it will not harm human beings."

"Will it not explode, sir?" and Karl still looked at the flask in doubt.

"Oh no—it will do its work with extraordinary silence and no less extraordinary rapidity. Do not be afraid!"

Slowly and with evident uneasiness Karl put the terrifying composition into his pocket, deeply impressed by the idea that he had about him stuff, which, if used in sufficient quantity, could "pulverize a mountain." It was awful!—worse than dynamite, he considered, his thoughts flying off wantonly to the woes of Irishmen and Russians. El-

Râmi seemed not to notice his embarrassment and went on talking quietly, asking various questions concerning Kremlin's funeral, and giving advice as to the final arrangements which were necessary, till presently he inquired of Karl what he proposed doing with himself in the future.

"Oh I shall look out for another situation,"—he said—"I shall not go back to Germany. I like to think of the 'Fatherland,' and I can sing the 'Wacht am Rhein' with as much lung as anybody, but I wouldn't care to live there. I think I shall try for a place where there's a lady to serve; you know, sir, gentlemen's ways are apt to be monotonous. Whether they are clever or foolish they always stick to it, whatever it is. A gentleman that races is always racing, and always talking and thinking about racing,—a gentleman that drinks is always on the drink,—a gentleman that coaches is always coaching, and so on; now a lady *does* vary! One day she's all for flowers, another for pictures, another for china,—sometimes she's mad about music, sometimes about dresses,—or else she takes a fit for study, and gets heaps

of books from the libraries. Now for a man-servant, all that is very agreeable and lively."

Féraz laughed at this novel view of domestic service, and Karl, growing a little more cheerful, went on with his explanation—

"You see, supposing I get into a lady's service, I shall have so much more to distract me. One afternoon I shall be waiting outside a picture-gallery with her shawls and wraps; another day I shall be running backwards and forwards to Mudie's,—and then there's always the pleasure of never quite knowing what she will do next. And it's excitement I want just now—it really is!"

The corners of his good-humoured mouth drooped again despondently, and his thoughts reverted with unpleasant suddenness to the "pulverizing" liquid in his pocket. What a terrible thing it was to get acquainted with scientists!

El-Râmi listened to his observations patiently.

"Well, Karl," he said at last—"I think I

can promise you a situation such as you would like. There is a very famous and lovely lady in London, known to the reading-world as Irene Vassilius—she writes original books; is sweetly capricious, yet nobly kind-hearted. I will write to her about you, and I have no doubt she will give you a trial."

Karl brightened up immensely at this prospect.

"Thank you, sir!" he said fervently—"You've no idea what a deal of good it will do me to take in the tea to a sweet-looking lady—a properly-served tea, you know, all silver and good china. It will be a sort of tonic to me,—it will indeed, after that terrible place at Ilfracombe. You can tell her I'm a very handy man,—I can do almost anything, from cooking a chop, up to stretching my legs all day in a porter's chair in the hall and reading the latest 'Special.' Anything she wishes whether for show or economy, she couldn't have a better hand at it than me;—will you tell her so, sir?"

"Certainly!" replied El-Râmi with a smile.

“ I’ll tell her you are a domestic Von Moltke, and that under your management her household will be as well ordered as the German army under the great Field-Marshal.”

After a little more desultory conversation, Karl took his departure, and returned by the afternoon train to Ilfracombe. He was living with one of his fisher-friends, and as it was late when he arrived, he made no attempt to go to the deserted house of his deceased master that night. But early the next morning he hurried there before breakfast, and ascended to the shattered tower,—that awful scene of desolation from whence poor Kremlin’s mangled remains had been taken, and where only a dark stain of blood on the floor silently testified of the horror that had there been enacted. The Disc, lying prone, glittered as he approached it, with, as he thought, a fiendish and supernatural light—the early sunlight fell upon its surface, and a thousand prismatic tints and sparkles dazzled his eyes as he drew near and gazed dubiously at it where it still clung to the iron pendulum. What could his master have

used such a strange object for?—what did it mean? And that solemn humming noise which he had used to hear when the nights were still,—had that glistening thing been the cause?—had it any sound? . . . Struck by this idea, and filled with a sudden courage, he seized a piece of thick wire, part of the many tangled coils that lay among the ruins of roof and wall, and with it, gave the Disc a smart blow on its edge . . . hush! . . . hush! . . . The wire dropped from his hand, and he stood, almost paralyzed with fear. A deep, solemn, booming sound like a great cathedral bell, rang through the air,—grand, and pure and musical, and . . . unearthly!—as might be the clarion stroke of a clock beating out, not the short pulsations of Time, but the vast throbs of Eternity. Round and round, in eddying echoes swept that sweet, sonorous note,—till—growing gradually fainter and fainter, it died entirely away from human hearing, and seemed to pass out and upwards into the gathering sunrays that poured brightly from the East, there to take its place perchance, in that immense diapason of vibrating tone-music

that fills the star-strewn space for ever and ever. It was the last sound struck from the great Star-Dial:—for Karl, terrified at the solemn din, wasted no more time in speculative hesitation, but taking the flask El-Râmi had given him, he opened it tremblingly and poured all its contents on the surface of the crystal. The red liquid ran over the stone like blood, crumbling it as it ran and extinguishing its brilliancy,—eating its substance away as rapidly as vitriol eats away the human skin,—blistering it and withering it visibly before Karl's astonished eyes,—till, as El-Râmi had said, it was hardly distinguishable from the dust and mortar around it. One piece lasted just a little longer than the rest—it curled and writhed like a living thing under the absolutely noiseless and terribly destructive influence of that blood-like liquid that seemed to sink into it as water sinks into a sponge,—Karl watched it, fascinated—till all at once it broke into a sparkle like flame, gleamed, smouldered, leaped high . . . and—disappeared. The wondrous Dial with its “perpetual motion” and its measured rhythm,

was as if it had never been,—it had vanished as utterly as a destroyed Planet,—and the mighty Problem reflected on its surface remained . . . and will most likely still remain . . . a mystery unsolved.





CHAPTER XIII.

FOR two or three weeks after he had received the news of Kremlin's death, El-Râmi's mind was somewhat troubled and uneasy. He continued his abstruse studies ardently, yet with less interest than usual,—and he spent hour after hour in Lilith's room, sitting beside the couch on which she reposed, saying nothing, but simply watching her, himself absorbed in thought. Days went by and he never roused her,—never asked her to reply to any question concerning the deep things of time and of eternity with which her aërial spirit seemed conversant. He was more impressed by the suddenness and terror of Kremlin's end than he cared to admit to himself,—and the "Light-Maps" and other papers belonging to his deceased old friend,

all of which had now come into his possession, were concise enough in many marvellous particulars, to have the effect of leading him almost imperceptibly to believe that after all there was a God,—an actual Being whose magnificent attributes baffled the highest efforts of the imagination, and who indeed, as the Bible grandly hath it—“holds the Universe in the hollow of His hand.” And he began to go back to the Bible for information;—for he, like most students versed in Eastern philosophies, knew that all that was ever said or will be said on the mysteries of life and death, is to be found in that Book, which though full of much matter that does not pertain to its actual teaching, remains the one chief epitome of all the wisdom of the world. When it is once remembered that the Deity of Moses and Aaron was their own invented Hobgoblin, used for the purpose of terrifying and keeping the Jews in order, much becomes clear that is otherwise impossible to accept or comprehend. Historians, priests, lawgivers, prophets and poets have all contributed to the Bible,—and when we detach class from class and put each in its proper place, with-

out confounding them all together in an inextricable jumble as "Divine inspiration," we obtain a better view of the final intention of the whole. El-Râmi considered Moses and Aaron in the light of particularly clever Eastern conjurers,—and not only conjurers, but tacticians and diplomatists, who had just the qualities necessary to rule a barbarous, ignorant, and rebellious people. The thunders of Mount Sinai,—the graving of the commandments on tablets of stone,—the serpent in the wilderness,—the bringing of water out of a rock,—the parting of the sea to let an army march through ;—he, El-Râmi, knew how all these things were done, and was perfectly cognisant of the means and appliances used to compass all these seemingly miraculous events.

"What a career I could make if I chose!" he thought—"What wealth I could amass,—what position! I who know how to quell the wildest waves of the sea,—I who, by means of a few drops of liquid can corrode a name or a device so deeply on stone that centuries shall not efface it—I who can do so many things that would astonish the vulgar

and make them my slaves,—why am I content to live as I do, when I could be greater than a crowned king? Why, because I scorn to trick the ignorant by scientific skill which I have neither the time nor the patience to explain to them—and again—because I want to fathom the Impossible;—I want to prove if indeed there is any Impossible. What *can* be done and proved, when once it *is* done and proved, I regard as nothing,—and because I know how to smooth the sea, call down the rain, and evoke phantoms out of the atmosphere, I think such manifestations of power trifling and inadequate. These things are all *provable*; and the performance of them is attained through a familiar knowledge of our own earth-elements and atmosphere; but to find out the subtle Something that is not of earth, and has not yet been made provable,—that is the aim of my ambition. The Soul! What is it? Of what ethereal composition? of what likeness? of what feeling? of what capacity? This, and this alone is the Supreme Mystery,—when once we understand it, we shall understand God. The preachers waste their time in urging men and

women to save their souls, so long as we remain in total ignorance as to what the Soul is. We cannot be expected to take any trouble to 'save' or even regard anything so vague and dubious as the Soul under its present conditions. What is visible and provable to our eyes, is that our friends die, and to all intents and purposes, disappear. We never know them as they were any more, . . . and, . . . what is still more horrible to think of, but is nevertheless true,—our natural tendency is to forget them,—indeed, after three or four years, perhaps less, we should find it difficult, without the aid of a photograph or painted picture, to recall their faces to our memories. And it is curious to think of it, but we really remember their ways, their conversation, and their notions of life better than their actual physiognomies. All this is very strange and very perplexing too,—and it is difficult to imagine the reason for such perpetual tearing down of affections, and such bitter loss and harassment, unless there is some great Intention behind it all,—an Intention of which it is arranged we shall be made duly cognisant. If we are *not* to be

made cognisant,—if we are *not* to have a full and perfect Explanation,—then the very fact of Life being lived at all is a mere cruelty,—a senseless jest which lacks all point,—and the very grandeur and immensity of the Universe becomes nothing but the meanest display of gigantic Force remorselessly put forth to overwhelm creatures who have no power to offer resistance to its huge Tyranny. If I could but fathom that Ultimate Purpose of things!—if I could but seize the subtle clue—for I believe it is something very slight and delicate which by its very fineness we have missed,—something which has to do with the Eternal Infinitesimal—that marvellous power which creates animated and regularly organized beings, many thousands of whose bodies laid together would not extend *one inch*. It is not to the Infinitely Great one must look for the secret of creation, but to the Infinitely Little.”

So he mused, as he sat by the couch of Lilith and watched her sleeping that enchanted sleep of death-in-life. Old Zaroba, though now perfectly passive and obedient, and fulfilling all his commands with scru-

pulous exactitude, was not without her own ideas and hopes as she went about her various duties connected with the care of the beautiful tranced girl. She seldom spoke to Féraz now except on ordinary household matters, and he understood and silently respected her reserve. She would sit in her accustomed corner of Lilith's regal apartment, weaving her thread-work mechanically, but ever and anon lifting her burning eyes to look at El-Râmi's absorbed face and note the varied expressions she saw, or fancied she saw there.

"The feverish trouble has begun"—she muttered to herself on one occasion, as she heard her master sigh deeply—"The stir in the blood,—the restlessness—the wonder—the desire. And out of heart's pain comes heart's peace ;—and out of desire, accomplishment ; and shall not the old gods of the world rejoice to see love born again of flames and tears and bitter-sweet as in the ancient days ? For there is no love now such as there used to be—the pale Christ has killed it,—and the red rose aglow with colour and scent is now but a dull weed on a tame shore, washed by

the salt sea, but never warmed by the sun. In the days of old, in the nights when Ash-taroath was queen of the silver hours, the youths and maidens knew what it was to love in the very breath of Love!—and the magic of all Nature, the music of the woods and waters, the fire of the stars, the odours of the flowers—all these were in the dance and beat of the young blood, and in the touch of the soft red lips as they met and clung together in kisses sweeter than honey in wine. But now—now the world has grown old and cold, and dreary and joyless,—it is winter among men and the summer is past.”

So she would murmur to herself in her wild half-poetical jargon of language—her voice never rising above an inarticulate whisper. El - Râmi never heard her or seemed to regard her—he had no eyes except for the drowsing Lilith.

If he had been asked, at this particular time, why he went to that room day after day, to stare silently at his beautiful “subject” and ponder on everything connected with her, he could not have answered

the question. He did not himself know why. Something there was in him, as in every portion of created matter, which remained inexplicable,—something of his own nature which he neither understood nor cared to analyse. He who sought to fathom the last depth of research concerning God and the things divine, would have been compelled to own, had he been cross-examined on the matter, that he found it impossible to fathom himself. The clue to his own Ego was as desperately hard to seize, as curiously subtle and elusive as the clue to the riddle of Creation. He was wont to pride himself on his consistency—yet in his heart of hearts he knew that in many things he was inconsistent,—he justly triumphed in his herculean Will-force,—yet now he was obliged to admit to himself that there was something in the silent placid aspect of Lilith as she lay before him, subservient to his command, that quite unnerved him and scattered his thoughts. It had not used to be so—but now,—it *was* so. And he dated the change, whether rightly or

wrongly, from the day on which the monk from Cyprus had visited him, and this thought made him restless and irritable, and full of unjust and unreasonable suspicions. For had not the "Master," as he was known in the community to which he belonged, said that he had *seen* the Soul of Lilith, while he, El-Râmi, had never attained to so beatific an altitude of vision? Then was it not possible that notwithstanding his rectitude and steadfastness of purpose, the "Master," great and Christ-like in self-denial though he was, might influence Lilith in some unforeseen way? Then there was Féraz—Féraz, whose supplications and protestations had won a smile from the tranced girl, and who therefore must assuredly have roused in her some faint pleasure and interest. Such thoughts as these rankled in his mind and gave him no peace—for they conveyed to him the unpleasing idea that Lilith was not all his own as he desired her to be,—others had a share in her thoughts. Could he have nothing entirely to himself? he would demand angrily of his own inner conscious-

ness—not even this life which he had, as it were, robbed from death? And an idea, which had at first been the merest dim suggestion, now deepened into a passionate resolve—he would *make* her his own so thoroughly and indissolubly that neither gods nor devils should snatch her from him.

“Her life is mine!” he said—“And she shall live as long as I please. Her body shall sleep, . . . if I still choose, . . . or . . . it shall *wake*. But whether awake, or sleeping in the flesh, her spirit shall obey me always—like the satellite of a planet, that disembodied Soul shall be mine forever!”

When he spoke thus to himself, he was sitting in his usual contemplative attitude by the couch where Lilith lay;—he rose up suddenly and paced the room, drawing back the velvet portière and setting open the door of the ante-chamber as though he craved for fresh air. Music sounded through the house, . . . it was Féraz singing. His full pure tenor voice came floating up, bearing with it the words he sang :

“And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee !

“For the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee,—
And the moon never beams without bringing me
dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee—
And so all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
In her tomb by the sounding sea !”

With a shaking hand El-Râmi shut the door more swiftly than he had opened it, and dragged the heavy portière across it to deaden the sound of that song!—to keep it out from his ears . . . from his heart, . . . to stop its passionate vibration from throbbing along his nerves like creeping fire. . . .

“And so all the night-tide I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride.” . . .

“God!—my God!” he muttered incoherently—“What ails me? . . . Am I going mad that I should dream thus?”

He gazed round the room wildly, his hand still clutching the velvet portière,—and met

the keenly watchful glance of Zaroba. Her hands were mechanically busy with her thread-work,—but her eyes, black, piercing and brilliant, were fixed on him steadfastly. Something in her look compelled his attention,—something in his compelled hers. They stared across the room at each other, as though a Thought had sprung between them like an armed soldier with drawn sword, demanding from each the pass-word to a mystery. In and out, across and across went the filmy glistening threads in Zaroba's wrinkled hands, but her eyes never moved from El-Râmi's face, and she looked like some weird sorceress weaving a web of destiny.

“For you were the days of Ashtaroth!” she said in a low, monotonous, yet curiously thrilling tone—“You are born too late, El-Râmi,—the youth of the world has departed and the summer seasons of the heart are known on earth no more. You are born too late—too late!—the Christ claims all,—the body, the blood, the nerve and the spirit,—every muscle of His white limbs on the cross

must be atoned for by the dire penance and torture of centuries of men. So that now even love is a thorn in the flesh and its prick must be paid with a price,—these are the hours of woe preceding the end. The blood that runs in your veins, El-Râmi, has sprung from kings and strong rulers of men,—and the pale faint spirits of this dull day have naught to do with its colour and glow. And it rebels, O El-Râmi!—as God liveth, it rebels!—it burns in your heart—the proud, strong heart,—like ruddy wine in a ruby cup; it rebels, El-Râmi!—it rises to passion as rise the waves of the sea to the moon, by a force and an impulse in Nature stronger than yours! Aye, aye!—for you were the days of Ashtaroth”—and her voice sank into a wailing murmur — “but now — now — the Christ claims all.”

He heard her as one may hear incoherencies in a nightmare vision ;—only a few weeks ago he would have been angry with her for what he would then have termed her foolish jargon,—but he was not angry now. Why should he be angry? he wondered dully—

had he time to even think of anger while thus unnerved by that keen tremor that quivered through his frame—a tremor he strove in vain to calm? His hand fell from the curtain,—the sweet distracting song of Poe's "Annabel Lee" had ceased,—and he advanced into the room again, his heart beating painfully still, his head a little drooped as though with a sense of conscious shame. He moved slowly to where the roses in the Venetian vase exhaled their odours on the air, and breaking one off its branch toyed with it aimlessly, letting its pale pink leaves flutter down one by one on the violet carpet at his feet. Suddenly, as though he had resolved a doubt and made up his mind to something, he turned towards Zaroba who watched him fixedly,—and with a mute signal bade her leave the apartment. She rose instantly, and crossing her hands upon her breast made her customary obeisance and waited, — for he looked at her with a meditative expression which implied that he had not yet completed his instructions. Presently, and with some hesitation, he made her another sign—a sign

which had the effect of awakening a blaze of astonishment in her dark sunken eyes.

“No more to-night!” she repeated aloud—
“It is your will that I return here no more to-night?”

He gave a slow but decided gesture of assent,—there was no mistaking it.

Zaroba paused an instant, and then with a swift noiseless step went to the couch of Lilith and bent yearningly above that exquisite sleeping form.

“Star of my heart!” she muttered—“Child whose outward fairness I have ever loved, unheedful of the soul within,—may there still be strength enough left in the old gods to bid thee wake!”

El-Râmi caught her words, and a faint smile, proud yet bitter, curved his delicate lips.

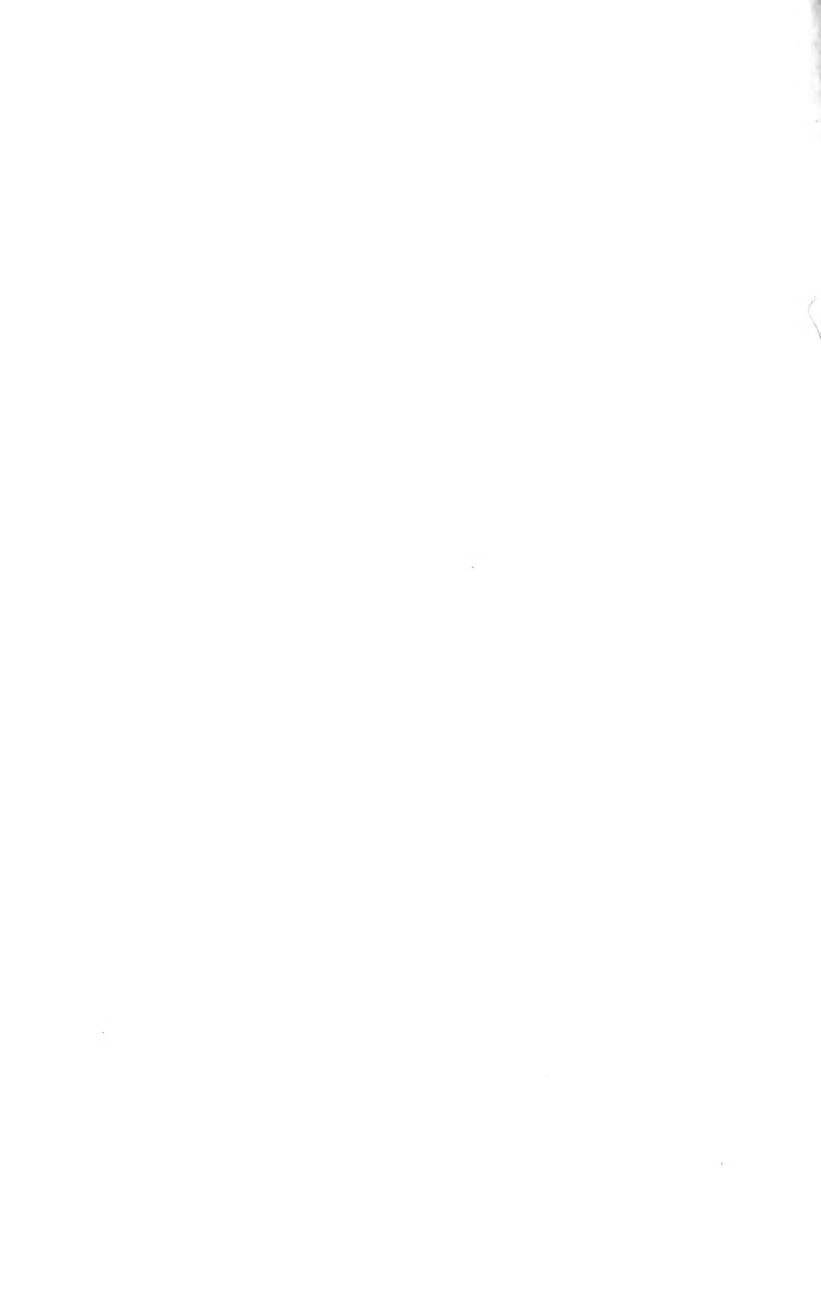
“The old gods or the new—does it matter which?” he mused vaguely—“And what is their strength compared to the Will of Man by which the very elements are conquered and made the slaves of his service? ‘My Will is God’s Will’ should be every strong

man's motto. But I—am I strong—or the weakest of the weak? . . . and . . . shall the Christ claim all?"

The soft fall of the velvet portière startled him as it dropped behind the retreating figure of Zaroba—she had left the room, and he was alone,—alone with Lilith.

END OF VOL. II.





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